



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 10:1-39

Topic

The Israelites make a series of promises to not neglect the house of God

Title

*“God’s House Is a
Very, Very, Very Divine House”*

Noh-*truh* deym? Or Noh-ter dahm?

Decades of neglect threatened Notre Dame Cathedral well before it recently burned.

Jean-Michel Leniaud, president of the scientific council at the national Heritage Institute, told reporters, “The lack of real upkeep and daily attention to such a major building is the cause of this catastrophe.”

A 2017 Time Magazine article on its deterioration noted, “the features of Notre Dame’s famous gargoyles looked as worn away as the face of Voldemort.”

Neglect is mentioned in the last verse of our chapter, at the end, where the Israelites promise concerning their Temple, “We will **not** neglect the house of our God.”

That phrase, “the house of our God,” appears eight times in the final twelve verses. The repetition suggests its application to us.

In our time, in the church age, “the house of our God,” is the gathering of believers in Christ. Collectively, we are the building, the Temple, the house. We go by the name “church.”

Leading up to their promise, the Israelites commit to several behaviors that would keep them from neglecting the house of their God.

I'm pretty sure none of us want to neglect the church. To that end, maybe we can glean a few things from the insights of the Israelites about how to *not* neglect.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 Not Neglecting Means That You Have Organization, and #2 Not Neglecting Means That You Have Obligations.

#1 Not Neglecting Means That You Have Organization

(v1-27)

There are a few Christian clichés that need to die:

1. "When God closes a door, He opens a window." I see what they're saying; God is still leading you. But He may not open anything. He may want you right where you are until He opens the right door.
2. "Let go and let God." I get that we are to rest in God. But the kind of rest the Bible describes is an active discipleship, a pursuit of

holiness, a striving to win the race. It isn't lethargy.

3. "God will never give you more than you can handle." Of course He will. He does all the time. He won't give you more than He can handle, living through you, empowering you.

I'm certain that I have said one or more of these. Don't be discouraged - but do stop saying them.

Here is one more: "The church is not an *organization*, it's an *organism*." I get that. We shouldn't run the church according to a worldly model, or suggest secular principles for spiritual progress. We are, after all, compared to an organism - a living, human body - with Jesus as its head.

Guess what? **An organism is organized.** The apostle Paul recognized that the body was organized when he wrote to the Corinthians and said, "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. (First Corinthians 12:18-21).

It's been a while since I've watched the classic *Star Trek* pilot, "The Menagerie." If I'm recalling correctly, at the end the woman, Vina, refuses to leave. It's because her beautiful appearance was an illusion. In reality she is much older, and was left severely deformed by the crash of *Columbia*. For a moment you see her as she really is. She wasn't reassembled quite right because the Talosians had never seen a human before. They didn't know how to organize her various body parts.

Your physical body is organized, and so should the body of believers be. Let's look at the opening verses of chapter ten with an eye for organization in the church.

Neh 10:1 Now those who placed *their* seal on *the document were*: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,

Verse two, "And there were eighty-two other guys with difficult to pronounce Hebrew names."

There **is** something important to notice in the list. The names are organized:

1. In verse one, Nehemiah and Zedekiah are the civil authorities who had been placed over Israel.
2. We are told that the names in verses two through eight are those of priests.
3. Next are listed the Levites and their brethren in verses nine through thirteen.
4. Last but not least, they listened to a lengthy list of lineage leaders.

Israel had an organized government. More importantly, they had a very organized religion.

We went through the Book of Exodus. You remember the meticulous set-up, sacrifices, and offerings. The priests and the Levites had specific duties. They weren't free to change things.

The two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, found that out when they offered what the Bible calls “strange fire” on the altar. Fire came from God and consumed them.

A worshipper didn't just walk in and do as he pleased. There were procedures; there was organization.

Read through the New Testament and the only conclusion you can honestly come to is that Jesus has called believers out from the world to meet together as His body in local assemblies. For example: Everywhere the apostle Paul went on his missionary journeys, he established churches. He preached Christ, and Him crucified, but he didn't leave converts to do as they pleased. He organized them under gifted leaders - pastors, teachers, elders, deacons.

I'm not going to talk about the various biblical forms of church government.

You can biblically argue for at least three. In practice if not philosophy, most churches end up with elements of them all.

I will say this: Whatever form of church government a local church adopts is not as critical as the men in leadership being committed to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. They must work together in love, not law.

It's enough for today to recognize that the believers of the church age are organized as local assemblies.

This isn't news to you. What might be news is what is being called the "house church movement." The proponents believe small churches were a deliberate apostolic pattern in the first century, and that they were intended by Jesus. Listen to this bold statement by a house church proponent:

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A largely hidden, yet growing phenomenon is changing the face of Christianity in the West and profoundly affecting the way in which Christians are choosing to practice their faith. Disillusioned by the lack of New Testament realities, abusive authority, and the spreading apostasy within large segments of institutionalized Christianity, thousands of Christians across America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom are gathering in homes to study the Scriptures together, pray, share the Lord's Supper and experience the fellowship and simplicity of first century Christianity.

In their way of thinking, there should be no mega-churches, and a church like ours ought to be at least 10-20 house churches.

Francis Chan is now a house church guy. In his most recent book he says, "God wants meaningful interactions when we gather. For this reason, we keep our churches small (ten to twenty people) meeting in homes to create a family atmosphere."

It's true, the first century believers *did* meet in homes. **Except when they didn't:**

- In Ephesus, the apostle Paul met for two years in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19).
- When correcting the Corinthians about their behavior at the Lord's Supper, one of the things Paul said was, "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (First Corinthians 11:22). *They were gathering someplace other than a house to celebrate the Lord's Supper.*

The first century church didn't only meet in homes. You'll find no instruction about its maximum size. In fact, the very first, first century church cancels out the house church movement:

1. First - The disciples in the upper room numbered 120, and that's way too many for the house church crowd.

2. Second - After Peter preached to the crowd at the Temple, they were an instant mega-church.

BTW - You'll also find that, whether house churches or not, the first century churches had a plethora of problems. We should model ourselves after them only to the extent they followed the teachings of the prophets and apostles.

The important thing is to follow the Lord's leading, and apply the organization of the New Testament. I've told you before that a church ought to have a story of how and why it was established. Or I should say, you should be able to ask how or why the fellowship was established.

The church isn't, as some pejoratively say, "organized religion." The church is an organism, comprised of living believers, organized by Jesus as Head of His body.

Not neglecting it requires that you have significant contact with a local fellowship with biblically organized leadership.

#2 Not Neglecting Means That You Have Obligations

(v28-39)

Obligations. Obligated. Obligatory. I don't like the sound of that at all. Sounds like legalism.

“Much obliged.” That's better. We use it when we are grateful for someone's assistance.

I approach the obligations that the Israelites put themselves under as them being “much obliged” to the LORD for His faithfulness.

Neh 10:28 Now the rest of the people -the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the

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lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding -

I can almost feel the excitement, the expectation, of the entire assembly of Israel. It was, to use a descriptive word, *palpable*.

The more we realize the truth that Jesus is in the midst of the gathered church on earth, the more palpable our times together will be.

Neh 10:29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

Don't get hung-up on the word, "curse." They were confessing that they would keep God's Law - the Mosaic Law - and if they didn't, they acknowledged there were consequences.

They were much obliged to have the Law - even if they would be disciplined for disobeying it.

Neh 10:30 We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;

The reason for this was *religious*, not *racial*. Foreign spouses would result in the Israelites worshipping foreign deities.

There are no 'racial' barriers, in the church, insofar as marriage goes. But there is still what we might loosely call a 'religious' restriction.

The apostle Paul indicates a believer in Christ should not wed a nonbeliever.

Neh 10:31 *if* the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's *produce* and the exacting of every debt.

Apparently the Jews had been reasoning that buying from Gentile merchants on the Sabbath was not a violation. It was. They repented.

They also committed to keep the every seventh year Sabbath as prescribed in the Law.

I'm not going to go into a long apologetic on why we in the church age are under no obligation to observe the Sabbath. We did that a lot in our studies in Exodus. I'll simply point out this one thing. The Sabbath is a lot more than Saturday worship, and not working from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. It involved a Sabbath year every seventh year; and a Jubilee year every seven times seven years.

To my knowledge, **none** of the groups who insist a believer must 'keep' the Sabbath are observing the Sabbath year, or Jubilee. Thus despite their claims, **they** are NOT keeping the Sabbath.

Neh 10:32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

Neh 10:33 for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

They were much obliged to give financially to the support of the Temple.

We talk about giving when it is in the text we are reading. In the church age, we can establish from the Bible that a believer in Christ should give money regularly, joyfully, and sacrificially as you have purposed in your heart.

Ask yourself:

1. Do I give to my church regularly?

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2. Do I give joyfully?

3. Is my giving sacrificial, as the Lord and I have purposed in my heart?

Considering all that Jesus has freely given us, we ought to be much obliged to use our money to support His body on the earth.

Neh 10:34 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for *bringing* the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as *it is* written in the Law.

Have you ever thought about how much wood they needed to stoke the fire of the Temple altar? More than the one or two cords we used to be able to burn before Big Government discovered air quality.

I read that the Israelites had to gather wood nine times throughout the year.

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No one was specifically tasked to do it in the writings of Moses, so they used the biblical method of casting lots.

A long, long time ago, in a younger body far from mine, I would go out and cut wood with the really manly men. There's nothing quite like the fellowship you share over chain saws and wood-splitters.

These Israelites... No tractors that toppled the trees in an orchard... No chain saws... No hydraulic splitters.

It speaks of hard work. Are you much obliged to do what is hard, or less glorious, serving in the church?

Neh 10:35 *And we made ordinances* to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD;

Neh 10:36 to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as *it is* written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God;

Neh 10:37 to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, *the* new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities.

Everything that was “first” belonged to God. Putting God first - that’s something you should be much obliged to do. What does that mean, though? The Oswald Chambers daily devotion the other day was titled, “Put God First.” He discussed putting your trust in God first... putting God’s will first... and putting God’s Son first.

Then he said, “Am I allowing my natural life to be slowly transformed by the indwelling life of the Son of God? God’s ultimate purpose is that His Son might be exhibited in me.” Think on that.

Neh 10:38 And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse.

Neh 10:39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary *are, where* the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers *are*; and we will not neglect the house of our God.

10% of the 10% went to the Levites to distribute to the priests. It was their only source of income.

I can't make a direct correlation to New Testament ministers and church staff, except to say that the apostle Paul thought it important to pay ministers while he worked to support himself.

What I do see in this is that the priests must have often had very little. When the people backslid, and withheld their tithe, the priests felt it. But they continued, trusting God - much obliged for the privilege of serving Him in their calling.

Their promise, "we will not neglect the house of our God," would be kept by their doing these things. Rededication - it's a good thing.

Fire was destructive for Notre Dame. It was formative for the church. Told to wait for the promise of the Father, on the Day of Pentecost after Jesus ascended to Heaven, the disciples experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit.

He was visualized as a wind-whipped fire in the second chapter of Acts. It spread over those gathered, and from them throughout the church age, right up until today.

Three thousand listeners were saved on the birthday of the church as Peter preached Jesus.

The sound of the wind, and the appearance of the flames, were a one time, not-to-be-repeated event. But the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower our service - well, that's ongoing as the church proclaims the living Christ; and it's why we sometimes describe believers as being "on fire."

Not neglecting leads to being on fire. Let's not neglect the church, the House of the Risen Son.

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