

Theme: One Story (Acts 17:26-28)

Title: “Rebuilding the Covenant” – Nehemiah 10:28-39

Aim: It’s what’s inside that counts. We need God’s covenant w/us.

Intro: Well, it’s that time of year when decorations go up. When I’m going anywhere in the evening, I enjoy seeing lights & other decorations displayed in yards & on houses. Before & during Thanksgiving, there may be an inflatable turkey display on the front lawn. You may gather (in small groups, of course) for a Thanksgiving meal & watch the Thanksgiving parade. And of course, at Christmas (or well before) there may be inflatable Santas & snowmen & perhaps nativity scenes as well. People like to decorate, celebrate. But I often wonder, when I see the mass of decorations, when people celebrate Thanksgiving & Christmas, are those folks truly thankful, & if so, to whom? And do those people know/believe the true meaning of Christmas? Do they know the Christ of Christmas? You can dress things up, decorate to the hilt, but it’s what’s inside that counts.

Theme: One story – one God, one plan, one story – God’s story of His saving grace & perfect plan of redemption. Are you written into His story? Do you know the God of His-story? We’re coming to the end of the OT. We’ve considered creation, the call of God to Abraham, thru whom He raised up a people, Israel. We’ve walked w/Israel in the exodus, to Sinai, where God gave them His law, displaying His character. We’ve seen how the people wanted a king, so they could be like all the other nations, but in effect, rejecting God as King. As the people of Israel rebelled they were divided & finally sent into exile, but God would not leave them there. He graciously brought them out of exile to become a nation again & gave them provision to rebuild the temple. As we study the books of Ezra & Nehemiah, we see that the temple is rebuilt, though the glory of God is not there. The wall around Jerusalem is also rebuilt, completing, on the outside, the restoration of

Judah. But something was missing (besides the glory of God). They had the outer trappings – the temple, the wall, the sacrifices, the feasts, but it's what's inside that counts. They lacked covenant w/or commitment to God. Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12 [READ]. Ezra was among (& the leader of) the 2nd wave of exiles returning to Judah, in 458 BC. He was devoted to the study & teaching of God's word. He found unfaithfulness in the covenant community – many of the returned exiles had married foreigners - forbidden by the law, but a persistent problem in Israel, leading to idolatry (& exile). And in other ways also, the people had forsaken God's commands. If they were going to rebuild covenant w/God, I) **They needed to be taught**. Not that they were w/out excuse, but we should understand that some of these people were ignorant of God's law. Here, we read that after the rebuilding of the wall, the people gathered together & Ezra read them the "Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel." W/the people standing in the open Ezra read from morning until midday, while the Levites walked among the people helping them to understand what they were hearing. If we are going to commit our lives to God & truly follow Christ, we must be taught just what that means. That's part of the ministry of the Church, which hopefully we are doing effectively – sometimes I wonder. It's also the responsibility of parents to teach our children/grandchildren what it means to know & follow Christ & commit our lives to Him – our most imp job! It's also our responsibility as Christians to help those who don't know Christ to understand what it means to know & follow Him & be committed to Him, by example & word. We shouldn't, however, expect those who don't know Christ to live like those who do. They need to be taught. Note the people's response to being taught: II) **They mourned their sin & confessed to God** (& in the midst of it, they worshiped). The people wept when they heard the law being read, realizing, I believe, that they had failed miserably & sinned against God.

Nehemiah & Ezra & the Levites encouraged the people. "This is a holy day" & a good thing we are doing, being reconnected w/the law of God. Don't mourn or weep, but rather rejoice. This was a good/imp step. The heads of families came back together the next day to "study the words of the law (vs13) & saw where God commanded them to keep the Feast of Booths/ Tabernacles in celebration & remembrance of God's deliverance from Egypt, & they did. They began to practice what they were learning. Then (chap9) they confessed their sin, again listening to the reading of the law for a ¼ of a day & then spending ¼ of a day confessing. Once we learn what God's standards are, we must own the fact that we have fallen far short. Confession is indeed good for the soul. Teach your children to confess. Practice it w/them when you fail. How have you failed to keep your commitment to God to follow Christ, to do His will, to make Him known? How have you sinned? Don't let it lie w/out confession/repentance when the word of God reveals your sin. III) **They made (renewed/rebuilt) covenant w/God** (9:38, chap10). Not only did they rehearse the sins of their fathers, but also owned their own sin. "Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing..." Their leaders signed the document & the rest of the people agreed to "enter into a curse & an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, & to observe & do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord & His rules & His statutes" (10:29). The obligations of the covenant were, in part, not take foreign wives or husbands, honor the Sabbath, support the "service of the house of our God," & to tithe. God had been faithful & they covenanted to be faithful, too. In Carol Kaminski's words: "Thruout the OT God continued to show grace & mercy to an obstinate people. W/full recognition that Israel's existence depended upon God's compassion & covenant faithfulness, God's people renewed their covenant under the leadership of Nehemiah." It is right & good for

you/I, in response to God's grace & compassion, to commit our lives to follow Christ, to be about His business, to live upright, moral & God honoring lives, to worship God & exalt Him. But, like the people who returned to Judah, we will fail again & again, try as we may. IV) **They did not follow thru** (chap13). Nehemiah returned to Susa & to King Artaxerxes service in 433 BC & was there for 12 years before he returned to Jerusalem. When he came back he quickly found that the people had not kept their covenant w/God. They had neglected the house of God & its support, they had not honored the Sabbath, they had married foreign wives, etc. Nehemiah rebuked them, cleaned house, so to speak, & sought to re-establish proper order. We all know that as hard as we try, we mess up again & again, tho our failings are w/out excuse. Our commitments too often fall short, which doesn't mean we shouldn't make commitment to God. But we are weak. I long for the day of Christ's return & His making all things new, when forever there will be no more temptation, no more failing, no more hindrance to following Christ. Come Lord Jesus! But here & now we must understand what I don't believe the Israelites of the OT ever did: V) **The Solution is not found in our covenant w/God, but in His covenant w/us**. Kaminski wrote: "We are reminded yet again that the solution to the human heart is not found in the renewal of Mosaic Law; nor to be found in any commitment by Israel to obey God's law. The issue is that sin dwells w/in, & needs to be dealt with in a radical new way if there would be any lasting change. God's solution is Jesus – His obedience, death & resurrection." Israel would have to wait 400 yrs for Messiah to come. We look back upon His coming & look forward to His coming again. Understand 2 things, which I believe we often miss or forget: 1) The Law of God & our covenant w/God, commitment to Christ provides a framework for our lives, but it cannot save. As a matter of fact, a primary purpose of the law was to reveal to us our need of a Savior. It is

right/good that we are committed to follow Christ, to obey God's word/law, but even if we were successful for most of our lives in keeping that commitment, that would not save us. Salvation depends on God. We are saved by the grace of God alone thru faith in Christ alone (Eph.2:8). 2) While commitment to Christ is a framework for our lives & must be our aim every day, we cannot keep that commitment w/out the Holy Spirit enabling & empowering & directing us. We must realize our total dependence upon the Holy Spirit (who is w/in us!) & continually give way to Him as He continually realigns our lives day by day. So, be teachable & faithfully teach God's word/standard. Mourn & confess sin & repent, as often as necessary. Make covenant w/God, be committed to following Christ & don't be afraid to recommit often. Try your best to follow thru; don't quit or give up. Know that your salvation doesn't depend on you, but on God, on the work of Christ. Understand your dependence upon the Holy Spirit & give way to Him every moment. God's story is nearing completion & if we're in Christ, we've been written in. It's one story – one God, one plan, one story.