

## Unit III: Special Offerings and the Sanctuary

# Here We Go Again!

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 31:27-34

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES: Nehemiah 8:1–10:39

PRINT PASSAGE: Nehemiah 10:28-39

## KEY VERSE

**We will not forsake the house of our God.** (Nehemiah 10:39b, KJV)

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**“We will not neglect the house of our God.”** (Nehemiah 10:39b, NIV)

## LESSON AIMS

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Understand the significance of the people’s commitment to God and God’s house.
- Appreciate the value of celebrating significant events in the life of faith.
- Participate in baptism or baptismal renewal as an act of spiritual dedication to God.

## \*KEY TERMS

**Atonement (verse 33)**—Hebrew: *kippur* (kip-poor’): a covering, purging; reconciliation; a covering or coating with pitch. The word *kippur* is translated in Hebrew as “propitiation” and is translated into English as “atonement.”

**Clave (verse 29)**—Hebrew: *dabaq* (daw-bak’): to cling, cleave, keep close; “join” (NIV).

**Exaction (verse 31)**—Hebrew: *massa* (mas-saw’): a loan; by implication, interest on a debt; a demand for money lent on a pledge, which the Jews agreed to forego in the seventh year; “debts” (NIV).

**Shekel (verse 32)**—Hebrew: *shegel* (sheh’-kel): was used as a unit of measure for measuring the weight of gold, silver, or copper; a (standard) weight.

**Shewbread (verse 33)**—Hebrew: *lechem* (lekh’-em): bread, food; showbread; meals; provision; “bread set out on the table” (NIV). The loaves of shewbread/showbread were placed on the table in the tabernacle and, later, in the Temple. They were placed in two stacks of six loaves each, with reeds separating them.



## The Biblical Context

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally written as one book. Nehemiah is the principal character in the book now bearing his name, although tradition credits Ezra as its author. The book opens with Nehemiah introduced as the respected cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, highlighting his desire to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. The events chronicled in the book of Nehemiah began during the twenty-fifth year of Artaxerxes' reign and describe Nehemiah's first and second terms as Jerusalem's governor: 445–433 BC and 524 BC, respectively. The book also highlights the themes of physical and spiritual restoration as it describes God's restoring Jerusalem and its people through Nehemiah's dedicated ministry. Chapters 1–7 record the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, and chapters 8–13 focus on efforts to restore the people's spiritual lives. The book also contains relevant messages for the faith community today, including the importance of prayerful dependence on God, practical leadership principles, the value of community and collaboration, and the need for believers to consistently align their lives with the standards of God's Word.

**Victuals (verse 31)**—**Hebrew: *sheber* (sheh'-ber)**: corn, "grain" (NIV), as food stuff; food, meat(s), fruit (including provender, flesh, and fruit).

**Ware (verse 31)**—**Hebrew: *maqqachah* (mak-kaw-khaw')**: an article of "merchandise" (NIV); a manufactured item, especially one expected to have a relatively long, useful life.

**\*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)**

## INTRODUCTION

"Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14-15) to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior (John 1:12, 13) . . . we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly most solemnly and joyfully (Acts 2:41) enter into covenant with one another (Hebrews 8:10-12) as one body in Christ" (Colossians 1:18). Do you recall repeating those words on a specified Sunday or experiencing your pastor use them as the basis for an instructional message periodically? Some may recognize these words as the introduction to a church covenant adopted by many congregations in the past. What is a church covenant, and why did or do churches opt to adopt them? Generically, a church covenant is a significant commitment to God, one another, and a church made by its members. A church covenant summarizes a promise made to God, the local faith community, and oneself, focusing on members' agreeing to align their life-

style and behavior with God's standards.

Additionally, a church covenant is a sign of a commitment that believers make to demonstrate obedience, personal holiness, ministry support, and mutual accountability to live by God's Word consistently. Although there is no scriptural mandate for congregations of believers to create a church covenant, the concept is significant in Scripture. Covenants were also well known in ancient times as agreements between equals or kings and their subjects. God sovereignly entered conditional and unconditional covenants with the nation of Israel and humanity in general. God's conditional covenants demanded strict adherence to His standards, promising blessings for obedience and judgment for disobedience, and the need to renew them to restore fellowship with Him. A vivid example of covenant renewal because of disobedience requiring

renewal and restoration is described in Nehemiah 8–10, as the post-exilic Jewish community was convicted of their sins against God’s laws upon hearing the reading and explanation of the Mosaic Law after the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### Separation to God (*Nehemiah 10:28-31*)

#### KJV

28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;

29 They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into 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 judgments and his statutes;

30 And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, not take their daughters for our sons:

31 And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt.

#### NIV

28 “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—

29 “all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

30 “We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

31 “When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.”

After hearing Ezra read from “the Book of the Law of Moses” (see Numbers 8), the people were convicted of their failure to obey its stipulations, confessed their sin, and wrote and sealed a covenant renewing their commitment to consistent obedience and devotion to God’s laws (see Numbers 9:3-8). Chapter 10 opens with the names of those who placed their seal on this written covenant, with Nehemiah’s name heading the list. Although only their leaders, Levites, and priests signed this covenant, the entire community committed themselves to it and reinforced their commitment with a curse, calling disaster on themselves if they failed to keep their word (**verses 28-29**). The first significant obligation they agreed to uphold was separating



themselves from the Gentile nations surrounding them by avoiding intermarriages (**verse 30**) and refusing to engage in business transactions with them on the Sabbath (**verse 31**). Their commitment to avoid marrying Gentiles was not their agreeing to a policy of racial isolation but, rather, obligating themselves to total separation to God, thus avoiding the idolatrous influence of marrying unbelieving husbands or wives. Historically, mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles led to disastrous consequences for the nation. The stipulation regarding keeping the Sabbath was equally significant.

The Jewish Sabbath was intended to be a day devoted to physical rest, the opportunity to focus on spiritual things, and a weekly reminder that they had a special calling from God as His chosen representatives in the world. Thus, disobedience to the Sabbath's stipulations was not symptomatic of a material problem but of a deeper spiritual one: deliberate rebellion against God. Their oath regarding keeping the Sabbath also included observing the Sabbatical year, allowing the land to replenish and for debt cancellation as outlined in Mosaic Law (see Leviticus 25:1-7, 20-22). This section of the people's covenant contains spiritual implications for the faith community now, including recognizing the importance of aligning our lives with the standards that God requires to maintain an obedient relationship with Him, hearing, reading, studying, internalizing, and allowing His Word to convict us of sin in our lives, and separating ourselves from the world's influence by devoting ourselves entirely to Him no matter the cost.

## **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

**What spiritual disciplines assist in our committing to separating ourselves from the world and to God and His Word (see Nehemiah 10:28)?**

## **Support for God's House (Nehemiah 10:32-39)**

### **KJV**

**32 Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God;**

**33 For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.**

**34 And we cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law:**

**35 And to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the LORD:**

**36 Also the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, unto the priests that minister in the house of our God:**

37 And that we should bring the firstfruits of our dough, and our offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, of wine and of oil, unto the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage.

38 And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house.

39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God.

## NIV

32 “We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God:

33 “for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.

34 “We—the priests, the Levites and the people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.

35 “We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.

36 “As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.

37 “Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work.

38 “A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury.

39 “The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil to the storerooms, where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the musicians are also kept. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

The community also committed themselves to supporting “the house of the LORD”—the newly restored Temple. They promised their support in four different areas of ministry. First, they committed to collecting the required temple tax annually from everyone twenty years of age and older (verse 32). The original tax was a half-shekel (about eight grams of silver), but

due to the nation's economic challenges, the agreement was collecting one-third shekel instead. This tax's underlying purpose was to remind the people that God had redeemed and freed them for a price. Therefore, God expected them to behave like they belonged to Him. **Verse 33** explains how the temple tax was to be spent: to provide what was needed for the priests to fulfill their duties and responsibilities regarding the Temple's ministries. Further, the people pledged to adopt a system to ensure that the wood required to keep the fire on the bronze altar burning was supplied constantly (**verse 34**). This necessary provision enabled the economically challenged the opportunity to contribute to the Lord's work regarding the Temple—His dwelling place among them.

The people also committed to annually dedicating to God the first fruits of their harvests, the firstborn of their sons and cattle, new wine, and oil to the priests as required in the Mosaic Law (**verses 35-37a**). Before doing anything else with them, the people were to bring to the priests the first fruits of their grain harvest, symbolizing offering the best to the Lord, to be stored at the Temple for the support of the priesthood. Finally, the people made a commitment to tithing a tenth of their produce to support the Levites, who were expected to tithe in support of the priests' needs (**verses 37b-39a**). The concluding statement of their sealed covenant (**verse 39b**) summarizes these obligations. It underscores their priority on spiritual things, the care and maintenance of the restored Temple, the priests and Levites, and the Temple ministries. Although God does not dwell in the physical buildings designed and dedicated as sacred places for worship, these verses highlight the importance of caring for and maintaining them through sacrificial giving. Whether "cathedrals large or small," each one is God's house and deserves the support of those who gather there. Such sacrificial giving is still God's plan for meeting the needs of the local church and supporting its ministries and leader(s). Believers must support the work of ministry by committing to regular, cheerful, proportionate giving to enable sharing with the needy, the proclamation of the Gospel, paying of salaries, and the maintenance of physical buildings, furnishings, and overall aesthetic appearance. Together, all of these priorities give evidence of the faith community's devotion to God and covenant relationship with Him.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**What are some ways for churches to convey to their members the spiritual significance of their contributions to support the worship facility and its services, leaders, and ministries?**

## A CLOSING THOUGHT

Nehemiah 10:28-39 describes the commitments that the post-exilic Jews made after sealing the covenant. They committed to obeying God's laws and supporting the Temple's ministries, priests, and Levites who served. They agreed to (1) separate themselves from the Gentile nations around them to avoid mixed marriages and to observe the Sabbath as outlined in the Mosaic Law, and (2) to contribute sacrificially to support the work of the Lord's house and those who ministered on their behalf. This renewed covenant came about because of the impact of



extended and in-depth exposure to God's Word. Systematic Bible teaching helps believers to be more disciplined and faithful in knowing and doing what God requires as it relates to the priorities of His house.

## YOUR LIFE

The people described in this lesson renewed their covenant responsibility to support the Lord's house, work, and workers. What about you? How generous are you in contributing to the maintenance of the church's buildings and grounds, and the support of its ministries? This week, as you consider this essential question, determine what you are able and willing to do to support the work of ministry in your church as an act of obedient devotion and reverence to God.

## YOUR WORLD!

The way a congregation cares for the building where it assembles for worship is a direct reflection of their thoughts about God. Examine your giving and assess your attitude toward supporting your church. As the Jewish remnant in ancient Israel, pledge your full commitment to the house of God and its biblical mission.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Dear God, we faithfully commit to supporting the maintenance and mission of Your house with the contribution of our time, spiritual gifts, and financial resources for Your glory and honor. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## CONCLUSION

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson explores this essential question: "Giving gifts to show appreciation and honor is common, but how do we give gifts to God that matter?" Read Genesis 4:1-16.

## Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, May 26	"Honor God with Your First Fruits"	(Proverbs 3:1-10)
TUESDAY, May 27	"Struggles of Faith"	(Hebrews 10:26-34)
WEDNESDAY, May 28	"The Righteous Will Live by Faith"	(Hebrews 10:35-11:4)
THURSDAY, May 29	"Half-hearted Giving"	(Acts 5:1-11)
FRIDAY, May 30	"Give Your All"	(Luke 20:45-21:4)
SATURDAY, May 31	"The Martyrs' Cry for Justice"	(Revelation 6:9-17)
SUNDAY, June 1	"Acceptable and Unacceptable Worship"	(Genesis 4:1-15)