

The New Resolve

by Ray C. Stedman

“All Scripture,” says the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, “is inspired [breathed-out] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” {2 Tim 3:16 RSV}. All of Scripture, therefore, has practical application to our lives today. All of it, whether it be a list of names as dry as dust, or a beautiful display of poetry from one of the psalms or the prophets, it all has great value for us.

Perhaps we have felt this as we have been studying through the book of Nehemiah together. We have been tracing in this book the steps to recovery from spiritual ruin or damage:

1. The first seven chapters tell the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. This teaches us how to restore our defenses – how to rebuild the walls and the gates of our lives – to close the gaps where the enemy has been getting at us, either through some outward practice or an inward attitude that has been destructive and damaging in our relationships with others.
2. Then, beginning with Chapter 8 and on through the middle section of the book, we have been looking at the need for a change of outlook:

- a) How to renew our minds,
 - to be reinstructed in the truth,
 - to correct our thinking
 - so we begin to think as God thinks.
 - b) That involves a careful hearing of the Word of God.
 - Remember the great scene of all Israel standing before the Water Gate and listening, hour after hour, to the reading of the Scripture.
 - That is what changed that nation.
 - c) As we apply this to our own lives, it also involves, as it did for them,
 - acknowledging our past error and failure and
 - confessing to God and praising him for his wonderful goodness.
3. That brings us to the natural outcome of this, which is commitment to a new lifestyle.

We find this in Chapter 10, though it actually begins with the closing verse of Chapter 9:

In view of all this, [i.e., their confession and praise of God] we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it. {Neh 9:38 NIV}

This is a wonderful display of the need which many people feel to put into verbal form the new directions they want to take in life. There follows here a list of the signers of this new covenant, or new agreement, that Israel is making. They fall into four groups, who are identified for us in a rather intimidating list of names. (I do not propose to read them all. I suggest that if you have a newborn son in your home, you may want to look through this list and pick out a name for him. Perhaps a name like Shebaniah or Hashabiah will make him distinguished among his peers!)

First of all Nehemiah himself, the governor, signs this, and with him a company of the priests whose names are given. Then a group of Levites, those who serve the temple, sign this agreement. Then there is a group of the leaders, the rulers or nobles of the land, who sign it. Finally, in Verses 28-29, we have the common people. I propose to look at this paragraph in detail.

The rest of the people priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, 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 all these now join their brothers 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. {Neh 10:28-29 NIV}

That is a list of what might be termed *The Company of the Committed*. These people see a need for preserving and perpetuating the changes in their lifestyles so as to keep in step with God; thus they sign this agreement to bind themselves to that end. This agreement represents a kind of universal urge found among humans to publicly and seriously pledge themselves to be loyal to a cause they feel is right. There are many instances of this recorded in history. For instance:

- When the Pilgrims were about to land at Plymouth, they formed what they called the Mayflower Compact. They drew up rules for living in the new land and they all signed it as an agreement to live by these principles and laws.
- Probably the most famous document in American history is the Declaration of Independence. Our forefathers signed that great statement setting forth the reasons why they felt God was leading them to establish a new nation upon this continent. Recall the closing words of that document:

For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

History records that most of those signers of the Declaration actually did have to give up their lives. Those who did not lost their fortunes. But all of them retained their sacred honor.

- Perhaps you have done something like that in your own life. There came a time when you realized you needed to make some changes in your behavior.
- Some of the greatest saints of the past did this. They drew up for themselves rules for their own conduct practices they felt would help them to walk with God and to grow in grace and favor before him.

I was reading the life of Abraham Lincoln not long ago, and was interested to read that in 1862, at the very height of the Civil War, Lincoln said to his cabinet:

“When the rebel army was at Frederick I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to anyone; but I made the promise to myself, and [hesitating a little,] and to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise.”

That was the background of the great Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves for the first time in this country.

In the remainder of the chapter, beginning with Verse 30, we find the specific commitments that these Israelites made. I would like to summarize them for you first and then we will look at them a little closer. There are six of them:

- First, they committed themselves to avoid the unequal yoke in their marriages.
- Second, they promised to observe anew the seventh day (the Sabbath), and the seventh year, (the Sabbatical).
- Third, they promised to provide money, grain and animals for the offerings of the temple.
- Fourth, they promised to bring the first fruits of their crops, their herds, their flocks, and their firstborn sons, to God.
- Fifth, they promised to pay ten per cent (the tithe,) of all their income, their crops and wealth to the temple.
- Sixth, they promised to attend faithfully the house of God.

Now let us look in more detail at these commitments.

First, their promise to **avoid the unequal yoke**.

We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons. {Neh 10:30 NIV}

That may look discriminatory, but there is an excellent reason for that. The peoples among whom Israel was called to live were unusually degenerate. They practiced public lewdness. They worshipped sexual organs. Their immorality had spread diseases among their people. They killed their children by throwing them alive into furnaces of fire in worship to their god, Molech. To protect the Israelites from these dangerous practices God had told them not to intermarry with these peoples. Though intermarriage might look right and proper to us, it would introduce into Israel attitudes and concepts that would ultimately undermine their

faith and destroy them and their nation. This is what actually happened. Though Solomon, David's own son, was said to be the wisest man who ever lived, he nevertheless contracted over a thousand marriages with foreign women, who brought their gods with them and eventually introduced pagan practices into the worship of Israel. By the time Solomon's son came to the throne, the nation was so divided they could no longer exist as one but were separated into two. So this was a very wise pledge to make.

What we are concerned about, of course, is the practical application of this to us. This command is actually repeated in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, not concerning racial distinctions, but religious. He says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers, for what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever, or what agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?" {cf, 2 Cor 6:14-16}. Many Christians have ignored that to their own detriment by intermarrying with others of a different faith. They have thereby so undermined their own faith that evil in many ways has ultimately crept in and destroyed their marriages. Now there is no guarantee that if you marry a Christian you are going to have a happy marriage because there are other principles involved. But it is much more likely to happen because there are principles and practices taught to us in the Word that make for happiness in marriage. It is certain that if you disobey this command, however, you are opening the door to much heartache, struggle and misery. There are passages designed to help people who have already done that for God is very practical and merciful. He recognizes that for various reasons intermarriage may occur. There are guidelines to help handle those situations. But by and large this is practical wisdom that needs to be adhered to today. Marry those who share the same faith you have, because faith is the basis for all of life.

The second thing the Israelites promised is to **observe the seventh day and the seventh year**.

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. {Neh 10:31 NIV}

This is a rather amazing commandment. God had said, “Six days shall you labor but on the seventh day you shall rest.” The seventh day is Saturday, not Sunday. In the last century many Christians mistakenly carried the restrictions of the Sabbath over into Sunday. They even called Sunday the Sabbath. If you have seen the movie “Chariots of Fire” you know that that is a central factor in that story. But Sunday is not the Sabbath. Sunday is the Lord’s Day. It is a day for rejoicing, witness, rest and celebration. It still preserves the idea of rest for the body. The Sabbath and the seventh year are both a picture of rest. What God is teaching us is that we need rest in the midst of our activity. It is still an easily demonstrated fact that if you do not rest periodically your body will begin to deteriorate. You cannot maintain health by constant activity. We need a repeated period of rest. So the seventh day is still a very wise thing to observe. But spiritually it is a picture for us of learning to rest in God at work. The Sabbath followed the pattern of creation. In six days God created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he rested. He no longer created. He stopped working. There is a wonderful verse in Hebrews that says, “He that enters into rest has ceased from his own work even as God did from his” {cf, Heb 4:10}.

What this wonderful visual aid from the Old Testament is teaching is:

- We are to work.
- We are to make decisions.
- We are to act.
- We are to make choices. But we must not forget that our activity will never be enough to accomplish what we hope to achieve. It cannot do it by itself. God must be at work in it as well. He will back up our labor and use it in ways that we could never anticipate. That is what this verse describes. We do not have to worry about doing it all ourselves.
- We are to do what we can do and then expect God to use that.

This is the repeated lesson of Scripture all the way through the Old and New Testament alike. God will take our simple effort and use it in ways we could never imagine.

That is the story of the feeding of the five thousand. God took a boy’s simple lunch of loaves and fishes and, as Jesus prayed over it and blessed it, multiplied it until it fed five thousand people.

That is the picture of one who rests in the working of God. That is the teaching of the seventh day.

But the seventh year teaches us to rest in the supply of God. God promises to supply his people’s needs. We see this in the 25th chapter of the book of Leviticus where the LORD says to Israel:

“Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land. Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety. You may ask, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?’ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in.” {Lev 25:18-22 NIV}

Again, that is God’s way of teaching his people that we cannot do enough to supply all our needs, but he can and will. One of the great lessons taught to us again and again is that God will supply.

I remember as a boy reading the thrilling story of Hudson Taylor. That enterprising young missionary went out to China and threw aside traditional approaches to the native population and began to preach and teach. He learned great lessons about God’s ability to supply. Eventually he came up with what has become a perpetual slogan of the China Inland Missionary, now called the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. It is: “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.”

Peninsula Bible Church has tried to operate on that basis through all its years, and we can say with great thanksgiving, it is true. God supplies our needs if we are careful to see that the work is done in his way.

I recall how excited I was a few years ago when we were planning the first Congress on Biblical Exposition. We needed a huge amount of money. It was in the early days of our planning when he had not developed any kind of a support list. We realized that unless we came up with at

least \$200,000 in cash within a week the work would fall apart and we could not go on. We would have to cancel our meeting and close out our effort. Several of us gathered at Mount Hermon and set this before the Lord. We said, "This is your work. If you want it to succeed, you must supply." At a meeting that night, although we never made any mention of money, to my great astonishment and thanksgiving, I was handed a check for \$50,000! Others began to call in and by the end of the evening we had the promise of \$200,000 in cash. This was God's supply. This is what he is teaching us: that we are not left to our own efforts. It is not up to us to do all the planning, programming and arranging and to supply everything. That is what the world believes. But our God is a God of supply. That is what the sabbatical year means.

The third thing they undertook was to **provide the money, the grain and the animals for the sacrificial offerings.**

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

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. {Neh 10:32-34 NIV}

They recognized the need for offerings and sacrifices, and that they had to continue from year to year. The history of Israel clearly reveals that the primary character of this nation was an emphasis on shedding the blood of animals and offering up their crops and grain to God. By so doing they were never allowed to forget the cost of redemption. Blood shed means a death has occurred. God is teaching his people that their problem with sin within was of such a serious nature it cannot be solved by merely instructing the mind. Only death can cure it.

These bloody offerings prepared the way for the death of Jesus and even our remembrance of that death at the Lord's Table. We ought to meditate on this every day. We should never allow ourselves to forget the cost of our redemption. It took all that God had to open a door that we might return to him. As Peter put it, "We are not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot," {cf, 1 Pet 1:18-19}.

The fourth thing, and very closely related to the foregoing, was the promise of these people to **bring the firstfruits of their crops, herds, flocks, and even their sons to God.**

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

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.

Moreover, we will bring to the store-rooms 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 oil. {Neh 10:35-37a NIV}

Why did they do this? Why was God so concerned about getting the first of everything dedicated to him? God tells us in his original command found in the book of Exodus.

After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. [You have no right to have it unless you will redeem it.] Redeem every firstborn among your sons.

In days to come, when your son asks you, "What does this mean?" say to him, "With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us

go, the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons. And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand. {Exod 13:11-16 NIV}

What they are doing, of course, is recognizing the ownership and rights of God in their lives.

A corresponding truth for us today is written across the front of this auditorium: “You are not your own; you are bought with a price,” {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. God owns us. We do not own ourselves. I have made sure that in the refurbishing of this building these words will not be taken down because they form the central element of our Christian faith. The world says, “You are your own. If you are pregnant and you do not want the baby, you can kill it, because you have a right to do what you please with your own body.” But the Bible says, “No, you are not your own. You do not have a right to do anything you like with the body God gave you.”

This is true in other aspects of life as well. We are not our own. We have no right to determine what we are going to do with our lives, or even whom we are going to marry. We have certain choices granted to us, but not all choices. One of the important aspects of becoming a Christian is to recognize the rights of God, and to live our lives within the limits he establishes. That is what this great passage is teaching. It is the way by which Israel recognized frequently and continually that their lives were not their own. They too “were bought with a price.” They belonged to God. He has the right to direct their affairs and make many choices for them.

The fifth thing is the **matter of the tithes**, or the tenth part of their wealth.

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. 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. The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and

oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. {Neh 10:37b-39a NIV}

It was about this time that the prophet Malachi was saying to the people, “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD, that I will open the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing such as you are not able to contain,” {cf, Mal 3:10}. This promise to pay the 10% is the response of the people to that appeal. God ordained that the tithes would be used for the support of the temple and the ministry of the Levites and the priests, in order that there might be spiritual guidance among this people.

When you come to the New Testament the tithe is no longer laid upon believers as a requirement, despite the fact that many churches teach that we are to pay the tithe today. The New Testament teaches that Christians are to give a proportion of their wealth to the Lord to recognize that it all came from him. You are permitted to determine that proportion yourself, “according as God has prospered you” {cf, 1 Cor 16:2 KJV}. Chapter 16 of First Corinthians, and Chapters 8 and 9 of Second Corinthians, are devoted to this subject. There we are told to choose ourselves how much we can give to God. The motive is God’s primary concern. We are to give as a response of gratitude for the blessings he has given us. God pays careful attention to the motive. Offerings do not mean a thing in his sight unless they are given with a cheerful spirit and from a thankful heart. They are to be used for the support of the ministry, but they are given as an expression of thanksgiving on our part.

God has ordained this as the way by which the ministry, the spiritual guidance of the church, would be supported. You give because God has first given to you. If you feel grateful for that; if your life has been changed; if you know that God has poured out blessing abundantly into your life; or stood by you in time of trial; or granted you unusual advantages; or opened doors of service and opportunity for you; or healed you when you were hurting and broken; then, of course, your heart becomes filled with gratitude, and out of that gratitude you are to give as freely as you can to the Lord. Some people can only give perhaps as little as 5%. I knew a man who gave 90% of his wealth to God all of his Christian life, and God used him

greatly. But that is something we are freely to determine.

The **final promise** is given in the last phrase of the chapter:

“We will not neglect the house of our God.” {Neh 10:39b NIV}

This is the commitment of these people to faithfully attend the worship services of the temple. All through the history of Israel the temple, or the tabernacle before that, was called “the house of God.” God signified his presence there by the Shekinah Glory that was located in the Holy of Holies.

Today, under the New Testament, no building is ever to be called “the house of God.” This has been ignored by the churches throughout the centuries, and temples, cathedrals, tabernacles and church buildings have all been called “the house of God.” If you look to the teaching of the New Testament, however, you will find that it is not a building but *the people* who are *the house of God*.

When David Roper was here with us he led us into changing the sign out in front. Where it says “Peninsula Bible Church,” he suggested we add the words “Meets Here.” Thus it is not the building that is Peninsula Bible Church – it is the people who gather here: They are “the house of God.”

It is wonderful to contemplate that. Where the people of God meet together, there you have the house of God. On Easter Sunday, when both our congregations meet together at the Shoreline Theater, while they are there, that secular auditorium becomes the dwelling place of God!

What this is teaching us is that we need the ministry of the saints to us all. The Apostle Paul prayed that the Ephesians may come to know “with all saints, what is the height and depth and length and breadth and to know the love of Christ which passes understanding,” {cf, Eph 3:18-19 KJV}. You cannot do that without the ministry of other people. This is of God. Hebrews has a specific admonition to that end: “Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching,” {cf, Heb 10:25}. The writer is referring to the return of Jesus. As we see it nearing, we need all the more to gather together because we need each other’s support.

Last week I heard of two of our members here, men widely different in temperament, who are working together. Normally they would not get along very well. They might not even like each other. But they work together and both bear witness to the fact that having to work with someone you do not particularly have affinity with has been a blessing to them. They have learned how to appreciate someone different from themselves. They have learned how to be tolerant and patient with one another. Though it has been a struggle, and they have had their moments, they both agree that God has used this to teach them how to grow. So even those in “the house of God” who irritate us can be of benefit to us – but especially, of course, those who delight us, encourage us and hold us up.

There, then, are the goals for successful living. That is what both Testaments teach us. Let me review them quickly for you:

1. Marry in the faith. Do not choose a mate who does not know the Lord.
2. Learn to work and live out of rest. Learn that God will pick up what you do and use it far greater than you were able to do. Expect him to do so and rest on that fact. Do not strain or worry, and feel it all depends on you to produce success in a ministry.
3. Frequently remind yourself of the cost of your redemption. Do not forget the precious blood of Jesus. We are all sinners by nature. We have not done anything that can make us acceptable to God, but we have acceptance because of the blood of Jesus. We are all sinners by nature. We have not done anything that can make us acceptable to God, but we have acceptance because of the blood of Jesus.
4. Daily remember that you are not your own. We are responsible to the Lord to follow his guidelines, to obey his words, and to honor him.
5. Support the ministry out of gratitude – do so out of a sense of blessing and thanksgiving.
6. And, finally, do not neglect meeting with others for mutual support, worship and prayer.

That is the way to make a success of the Christian life. How wonderfully practical it is!

Granted that it takes discipline. You will not do this casually. You cannot just shove your hands in your pockets and sing a few hymns and this all happens to you. You must decide and stick with that decision. It is not wrong to do that. Some people say that is putting yourself under law. No, it is not. It is merely recognizing the goals and the principles God has given you. That is what a disciple is – one who disciplines himself or herself.

But there is one other very important point here. We do not want to leave this without referring to it. Ultimately, these people failed to follow through with their commitment. Subsequent history reveals that all the old habits returned. All the old sins were revived among them. The nation once again lost the blessing of God upon it. Why? We discover the key in Verse 29. They said, “all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses,” {Neh 10:29 NIV}. They were depending on their own efforts to obey. They bound themselves with a curse and an oath. They were saying, “We will do this or else.” They were relying upon their own self-determination, their own will power. They were gritting their teeth and swearing to perform properly. There is no expression of any need of help from God or of any provision for failure and return.

That is what the New Testament adds. It is right to vow. It is right to write it down for your own benefit and remind yourself frequently of your

goal. But we must always add the words that Paul uses of himself,

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. {cf, Phil 4:13 KJV}

That is what makes the difference. Job went through some painful experiences of discipline until he learned this lesson. This is what he said: “Blessed is the man whom God corrects. So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty, for he wounds, but he also binds up! He injures but his hands also heal!” {Job 5:17-18 NIV}.

Who is going to teach this generation how to live if we do not do it? That is why God calls his people to be obedient to the things that he teaches. When we do, health begins to spread over the land around us, in the community, in the family and in the home, as once again we change the circumstances of our lives in dependence on the strength of God.

Let us sing together these words:

I will serve thee because I love thee.
You have given life to me.
I was nothing before you found me.
You have given life to me.

Heartaches, broken pieces,
ruined lives are why you died on Calvary.
Your touch is what I longed for.
You have given life to me.

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