



A CHURCH IN COVENANT **Nehemiah 9:38**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to Nehemiah 9. Feel free to use Table of Contents, if necessary, to find Nehemiah in the Old Testament. You may or may not be aware that Mandy wrote that song that we were just singing. I praise God for His grace in the way He gifts people in this body, and for gifting us with Mandy and her leadership in that way. I'm thankful tonight.

I'm thankful for Bart Box last week, who led us in the Word, and particularly thankful for the picture that we're diving into on how to provide solid, biblical, theological training in the context of the local church, so that every businessman, businesswoman, and every mom and dad and every individual follower of Christ has ministry training in the context of where we live, so that we are all equipped to carry out the Great Commission that God has entrusted, not to select ones of us, but select...entrusted to all of us.

So, really excited about what is coming in the days ahead under Bart's leadership. I'm thankful tonight for some time in Colorado this last week. Last Saturday, Heather and I flew into Colorado in blizzard-like conditions, and so I'm particularly thankful for 80 degree weather today. However, we were...last Sunday...with my mentor in ministry, Dr. Jim Shaddix. He's a pastor there in Denver. He is a man who has, basically, just poured his life into me over the last, well, nine years really. I went to study preaching under him. He taught me, not just about preaching and valuing the Word of God in the church, but he invested his life and his family into Heather and me. This was the man who, when my dad passed away unexpectedly from heart attack, got in the car with us in the middle of the night from New Orleans and drove us up to Atlanta, and that's one picture of a thousand others. We were refreshed with them last Sunday and had some rich time with the faith family he leads in the Word and so very, very thankful for that.

Then, really thankful to be back home and really thankful to be amidst this faith family, particularly tonight, because of what we're about to dive into. We've been through a journey over the last few months. We kind of took a break for the last three weeks when we have looked at the Passion week: Life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Last week, looked at Mark 4 and 5 and the glory of Christ there. So, we kind of took a pause from this series on Covenant Community. We're diving back into it.

I was sharing with the elders: I really sense the Spirit of God just creating a spirit of unity among us as a body. We've been through a process where, literally, hundreds of people have joined together with this faith family in February and membership with this body, and we were looking at "Vision, Mission, Goal." We glorify God by making disciples of all nations, and there's just this sense that, "All right. We've locked arms. Let's do this thing. Let's go forward together."

What we're going to do tonight is really dive a step deeper into that locking arms part as we talk about a church in covenant. Let me give you a little background before we get into the

notes. When it comes to covenant, you look in Scripture, you see that at different points, God entered into covenant with men like Noah, Abraham, Moses. This is foundational. It's foundational for understanding the Old Testament, which literally means "old covenant." This was how God related to His people, and all of that in the Old Testament, sets the stage for the beauty that's revealed in the new covenant, New Testament. The picture that, in Christ, that's how we relate to God: By grace through faith in Christ. We have the new covenant and the New Testament, and there's no need for a new, new covenant in the future, or, a newer covenant to come. This is the covenant that seals us today, as children of God and seals us for all of eternity.

Now, the unfolding of how that looks, the glorification that we will one day experience when we gather around the throne, as we sang about, we still await the culmination of that, but it's all based on the new covenant. We have no need for a newer covenant between us and God.

So that's the picture of covenants between God and men in Scripture. Then, in Scripture, we also see covenants between men, covenants between people. We see, 1 Samuel 18, covenant between David and Jonathan. We see marriage described as a covenant between a man and a woman. We see passages like we are going to look at tonight in Nehemiah 9. It talks about the people of God entering into agreement with one another, a covenant with one another. How they're going to live together.

So, that's the picture we see in Scripture. Fast forward through some of the church history and gradually, the church became something you were born into. Maybe baptized into, born into. You were a member of the church, a part of the church, regardless of whether or not you had actually trusted in Christ for salvation. This is why the Reformation was so huge in the 15th-16th centuries because people started breaking away from the official established church and saying, "No. This is not something you're born into. Trust in Christ for salvation." There's a whole picture that we've looked at. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, just came to the forefront.

So, what you had were believers who had trusted in Christ for salvation, who gathered together in congregations of people who said, "We are Christians, and we're the church, not because we were born into something, but because we trusted Christ, and we're following Christ." We take that kind of congregational picture that we are used to today almost for granted because in that day, this was a risky thing. These congregations would experience all kinds of different stuff from persecution and trials as a result of breaking off from the established state picture of the church.

So, what you have in the 15th-16th-17th-18th centuries, you have a lot of these churches that would establish covenants. There was, basically, a picture of, "This is who we are. We're not just the people who were born into a church; we're a people who trusted in Christ in the difficult time, a time when it's not easy to be in a group like this. We're going to commit to one another. We're going to uphold one another. We're going to strengthen one another. We're going to stand with one another", all the things that we just sang about, that's what we're going to do with one another.

So, you see churches with covenants until you get late 19th into the 20th century, and that whole process began to fade and faded for a variety of different reasons. You had an increase in secularization of the church, and you had...well, even in the name of church growth. If you want people to come to your church, we don't ask for steep commitments when somebody comes to the church, and it's the same kind of picture we have in our day:

Commitment phobia. We resist committing to anything. We'd rather keep our options open, and that certainly transfers over in the church.

It's what we talked about a couple months ago when we talked about church hopping and church dating trends that are all over our church culture today. You just kind of go from one to the next. You don't really need to commit your life to a body of believers, but that's not what the New Testament teaches. The New Testament definitely teaches that we commit ourselves to a body of believers.

So, what we've been doing as elders for the last two years is diving into, "Okay, in a commitment phobia kind of culture, how do we best show the beauty of what God is designed for the church?" We've been praying, studying the Scriptures, looking at church covenants in history, looking at church covenants today in churches, and tonight, I want us to begin a process where we begin to look, "For us is the body called The Church at Brook Hills, what does it mean for us to be the church with one another?"

We're going to dive, tonight, into Nehemiah 9, and I want to show you some interesting parallels, and there's not exact parallels here, but I want to show you some very interesting parallels between this old covenant community of faith in Nehemiah, and this specific new covenant community of faith called The Church at Brook Hills. We're going to look at what it means.

The Value of the Church ...

When you hear a church in covenant, think relationship; a church in relationship with one another. What does that look like? Now, when it comes to your notes, you see "The Value of the Church" there at the top of your notes. The first half of these notes are all review. Because we've had about a month breather, what I want to do is I want to go back to stuff we've already studied, and we're going to fly through this.

However, just as a reminder, kind of bring us all onto the same page in what we've already looked at in Scripture, and then from that, take another step deeper. So, the value of the church. Something we started talking about at the beginning of March, in Hebrews 10:19-25, we saw two main truths there.

We are recipients of a new covenant.

Truth number one: We are recipients of a new covenant. We talked about how the superior covenant was inaugurated in Christ. We do not have to go offer blood sacrifices or offerings. The blood has been sacrificed once and for all, and Christ's blood is sprinkled over our hearts to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, Hebrews 10 says, so that God remembers our sins no more. As a result of this new covenant, you and I have unlimited access into the presence of God, even at this very second. What Old Testament, old covenant, saints longed for, you and I experience at this very moment. The wonder of the thought that you and I, at this moment, have unlimited access to God because we are recipients of a new covenant. Unlimited access to very throne room of God and will for all of eternity. That's awesome.

Now, what we saw in Hebrews 10, though, was not just how this new covenant affects our relationship to God, although that is huge. It's not just vertical. The new covenant has horizontal implications as well. In other words, the new covenant doesn't just affect our relationship to God; the new covenant also affects our relationship to each other, and so that's where the second truth comes in.

We are members of a new community.

We talked about how we are recipients of a new covenant, and we are members of a new community. This is where we see in Hebrews 10, the author of Hebrews says, "*Therefore, in light of the new covenant...*" Three times he uses these two words. He says, "Let us...therefore, let us, in light of the new covenant, let us draw near to God. Let us hold fast to the hope we profess and let us not give up meeting together." "Let us encourage one another" is what he says.

The Value of Church Membership ...

So basically, what the author of Hebrews says is, "In light of what Christ has done in each of our lives, as individuals, let us do this together." In light of the new covenant, this is how we live together, and there are ramifications on what Christ has done in us for all of us coming together, members of a new community. This is why we talked about how church membership is important.

I want to remind you that you look in the New Testament, you won't find the term "church membership" anywhere. Doesn't mean it's not there though. It's kind of like "Trinity." Some words you don't see in Scripture. You don't see that exact word, but it's all over the pages of Scripture. It's the same picture when it comes to membership, what it means to be a committed part of a body of Christ, a local body of believers.

Church membership is implied by church gatherings.

What we saw in February/March was that church membership is implied by a variety of different things in Scripture, New Testament. Point out these four. First, church membership is implied by church gatherings. The word for "church" in original language of the New Testament is "*ekklesia*". Literally, means "a gathering." We talked about how there's some pictures in the New Testament. When it talks about the church, we see the universal body of Christ, which means all Christians at all time; all Christians all over the planet today. However, those are in the minority. The dominant usage of the word "church" in the New Testament refers to local gatherings of believers. The church that gathers at this house, or the church that gathers in this community or this city or this region, or the church is spread out throughout this region. It's a picture of local bodies of believers.

That's the predominant emphasis in the New Testament, so that if someone were to say today, "Well, I'm the member of the universal body of Christ. I don't need to commit my life to a local body of Christ.", that actually goes completely contrary to the pattern of the New Testament. Doesn't add up with Scripture. The New Testament expects every follower of Christ to be linked with a gathering of believers, that they gather together to worship with and to serve and love the people in that gathering. That's the picture. So, we asked each other at that point, "Okay, who...where are you gathering? Who are you gathering with? Where's the local church, the gathering of believers, that your life is committed to?" Church membership is implied by church gathering.

Church membership is implied by church discipline.

Second, church membership is implied by church discipline. We've mentioned at a couple points that we're going to be diving into this whole issue. Passages like Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and I said they're coming, and they're coming like couple weeks from now. They're coming. We're going to look at these passages where Jesus outlines a process...Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 of the New Testament implementing that...a process for addressing unrepentant sin in the church. This is huge. It's one of the reasons

why every single follower of Christ in this room needs to be a member of a local church, because if we try to live out Christianity, lone ranger, on ourselves...by ourselves, then we will inevitably fall away from Christ.

It's what the New Testament teaches. It's the height of arrogance as a Christian to think that you can do this thing on your own, and you don't need others around you. That misses the whole point of what Scripture teaches. We need each other. We're all prone to wander, prone to stumble, and we need each other to help us stay focused, spur us on toward Christ.

So, Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5 outline a process to do that in each other's lives: Discipline and restoration. However, for example, in 1 Corinthians 5, it gets to a point where, if someone continues, unrepentant and willful unrepentant sin, that they're actually removed from the church. That, obviously, implies that they were a member of that church at one point, and now they're not a member of the church.

Now, we read a passage like that today, and we think, "Big deal. Okay, I'm not a member of the church anymore. It didn't matter that much in the first place." However, in the New Testament, this is a huge deal. Such that, if you were not a member of the church, then you were no longer looked at even as a Christian. Treat them as an unbeliever. The New Testament has no classification for Christians who are not members of churches. Church membership clearly implied by church discipline.

Church membership is implied by church leadership.

Third, church membership is implied by church leadership. Hebrews 13 is the passage we'll look at in a few weeks. It talks about...it's not just Hebrews 13; it's Acts 20. It's 1 Peter 5. How elders, pastors in the church are entrusted with the care of members of that church. The reality Scripture teaches is there is an accountability that I have before God, and it says...Hebrews 13, "Elders are men; your leaders are men who must give an account before God for your spiritual care. They are entrusted to your care."

So, the picture is...now this is not that I, as a pastor in this church, don't care about Christians who are not part of this church, don't care about Christians on the other side of the world, or for that matter, don't care about non-Christians. It's not what this is about. However, what the Scripture teaches is that there is a local body called The Church at Brook Hills that's been entrusted to my care and the care of elders, pastors in this body, and I...we will stand before God to give an account for your spiritual care. That's serious stuff.

Now, think about what we've done in a whole...in diluting church membership in our church culture today. How we've undercut that whole picture. There are people who are on membership roles, so to speak, who would...who, maybe, are classified as a member of The Church at Brook Hills or classified as a member of this or that church, who live in a different city at this point. Have moved off or have, ten years ago, gone to a different church. It's important to me that I know the people that God has entrusted to this body, and it's important to elders to know that, and it's important for you to be entrusted to the care of pastors.

Church membership is implied by church leadership, which, as a side note, we're going to spend the next couple months...this is all going to lead us up to the end of June, and we're going to celebrate this whole picture together as a faith family at the end of June. However, after that, really to have a process to where we clearly define, "All right, who's a member of this body? Who is a living...not just on a roll or database...who is a living, breathing member of The Church at Brook Hills for this very reason.

Church membership is implied by church accountability.

Fourth reason, or a fourth implication of where we see church membership in the New Testament. Church membership is implied by church accountability. This is all over the New Testament. We see churches and members of churches held accountable before God. In Acts 6, church members are accountable for appointing leaders. Galatians 1 says, "Church members are accountable for making sure the gospel is preached in the church." If I don't preach the gospel, yes, there's an account between me and God, but you are held accountable, as a member of this church, for not getting in my face if I'm not preaching the gospel. 2 Timothy 4...this commands us to preach the Word, yes, that's entrusted to me, but if the body is not hearing the Word in the gospel, then the body's accountable to God for addressing that. Acts 13, the body's accountable for commissioning and sending out and praying for and supporting missionaries. There's all kinds of pictures of accountability.

Now, you look at those words we just wrote down...accountability, leadership, discipline...do these words not fly right in the face of American individualism? Like, there's a reason these words are not top on the church growth market at this point. Accountability, leadership, discipline. I mean, aren't there at least a few of us in this room that when we hear "church discipline," think, "Oh, okay. I'm glad I'm just a Sunday night attender here because this is...I don't know if I'm in for this. I don't know if I really want to dive into church discipline."

It's at this point when we are faced with a couple of decisions. Two options really. One, we can go with what feels most comfortable in our culture...even our church culture. Or, two, we can go with what Scripture says, and we're going to choose the latter. In the process, I'm convinced what we're going to discover is that God knows what He is doing. He's given us His Word for a reason, and though it may rub us a little wrong at points, though it may go against the grain of what we would even think would be best, He knows what is best.

It's good for a body to say, "We're going to trust your Word, and we're going to follow your Word completely. We're going to do whatever we need to do to line up to be able to carry out principles of your Word." Because, the reality is, if church membership, for example, means nothing, then church discipline is nowhere even near the picture. Doesn't matter. It's why we need to raise...one of the reasons...many reasons why we need to raise this whole picture.

The Value of a Church Covenant ...

So, we're going to take the Word, and we're going to see what it says. Now, that begs the question, when it comes to church covenant, you don't see anywhere in the New Testament where the church is commanded to establish covenants with one another. So, if it's not in Scripture, then why would we even be talking about it? That's a really good question. I think it leads us to a couple of questions.

If something is not in Scripture, then the first question we need to ask is, "Is it prohibited in Scripture?" For these churches in the past, in church history, or even today, is it prohibited for churches to have covenants? The answer is absolutely not. It's not prohibited. Now, it would be, of course, if we were looking at a covenant as something that replaced or added onto the new covenant, changes the way we related to God. If we were coming up with rules and regulations we needed to follow in order to have a right relationship with God, then yes. We're way out of bounds, and that's the last place we want to go. However, it's certainly not prohibited in Scripture, especially as we're going to talk about this tonight.

The second question, though, we would ask, "Okay, if it's not prohibited in the Scripture, well, then, is it beneficial? Is it valuable?" That's where I want us to think, "Is it valuable?" The value of a church covenant.

A covenant defined ...

What I've put here in your notes were a couple of different definitions of "covenant." The first one is *Webster*. This is not authoritative Word of God. This is totally unauthoritative, *Webster Dictionary*. A covenant defined, but I think it'll kind of get our minds thinking through this word, "covenant." A covenant is a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties, especially for the performance of some action. The focus there...this is important...is on action. It's important when we think about covenant, think of that word "action", because even when we talk about church covenant in just a minute, we're not talking about a statement of belief. Covenant focuses more on behavior, not necessarily as much what you believe, but what you do, how you act.

Now, obviously, our behavior is grounded in belief, but when we talk about covenant, we're telling them what we do. Action; how we live. So, all kinds of different pictures in the world of covenant. What would make a church covenant distinct? What would make a church covenant unique for a community of faith that is unique, apart from any other organization in the world?

A church covenant defined ...

Well, church covenant defined...and this is not an official definition either, but hopefully it takes the picture of covenants between people and Scripture, and then the picture we see throughout church history. Church covenant is a clear expression of a church's commitment to love one another as a community of faith; a clear expression of a church's commitment to love one another as a community of faith.

Key words all over that definition there. It's a clear...it's a central expression. It's takes...any church covenant attempts to take the 66 books of this Bible, and particularly, the 27 books that make up the New Testament, give us the picture of the church and say, "What does the church look like at the core? When it comes to behavior and action, what does the church do with one another?"

Obviously, we see in Scripture a deep level of commitment that's involved. We are not living for ourselves. We've denied ourselves following Christ, and we're living for each other. We've seen in Ephesians 4 that love is the distinguishing mark of the church. Jesus talked about how love is the identifying marker of His people. John 13:35, "*By this will all men know that you are my disciples...*" When you do what? "*...when you love one another.*" That's the picture: A commitment to love one another as a community of faith. So, a church covenant is a clear expression of how we're going to love one another.

Now, let's step back and ask the question: "Is it...is something like that beneficial? Something like that valuable?" To have a clear expression that when we look around at each other, when we have said to each other, "I am absolutely committed to loving you in the way Scripture says. I need to and want to love you, and I need you to love me in that way", and our community is going to be marked by the kind of New Testament love that is all over the pages of Scripture. Is that a good thing?

I think absolutely that's a good thing. I think there's a reason why, when believers who are huddled together in the 15th and 16th century in very difficult times, they said, "We're going to make very clear that we're with one another on this thing, not in a way that adds to Scripture, not in a way that, in any way is extra biblical and replacing new covenant, but

in a way that just says, 'We are going to carry out this picture in the New Testament by the grace of God.'"

So, with that background, I want us to come to Nehemiah 9, and we're going to look at a people who entered into an agreement...covenant...together. Again, there's not perfect parallels here, but I hope that tonight, the four interesting parallels I want to show you, that I hope will encourage us as a new covenant community of faith in this room.

Nehemiah 9:38 is the key verse. I will give you the overview that leads up to verse 38. Years before this book was even written, you had the people of God in Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem, wonderful city with walls all the way around it. What happened is they were attacked and the temple was destroyed. The walls around Jerusalem were broken down, and the people of God were taken from Jerusalem into exile, into a foreign land, separated from one another, separated from their land. Everything turned upside down.

This is the drama that's unfolding in the Old Testament history, which particularly, when you read the prophets, it's prophets foretelling, "Hey, this is coming. Judgment is coming." Or, it's prophets saying to people in exile, "God is going to bring you back together." He does. He brings them back together, brings them back to Jerusalem, and once they get back to Jerusalem, the first thing they do is they rebuild the temple. That's what the book of Ezra is about, right before Nehemiah.

Then, when we come to the book of Nehemiah, what they do is they rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. They're rebuilding the city. So, for the first seven chapters of this book, that's what they do. They rebuild these walls. You get to the end of Nehemiah 7, and the walls are rebuilt, and the rest of this book, starting in Nehemiah 8 and going to Nehemiah 13, is you see God rebuilding the people. You have a rebuilt temple, rebuilt walls, now you've got this rebuilding of the people.

In that process, they come to Nehemiah 9:38, and I want you to see them coming together and saying, "This is how we're going to live as the people of God." Nehemiah 9:38. *"In view of all this..."* We're going to talk about what "all this" is. *"...we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests are affixing their seals to it."*

The Foundation of a Church Covenant ...

We are a community grounded in the Word of God.

One verse. We've got this picture of the people of God saying in a public, tangible, accountable, specific way that is blessed by leadership, we are saying, "This is who we are as the people of God." So, I want to show you these four parallels, and I hope will be encouraged by them. Number one, we are a community grounded in the Word of God.

Take a left, one chapter and go to Nehemiah 8. I want you to see where this whole rebuilding of the people started. This is a passage we looked at a long time ago. I say a long time ago, like two and a half whole years ago. We looked at this passage, and we've looked at it different points. It's one of the most incredible pictures in all of Scripture of the importance of God's Word in the middle of God's people. Nehemiah 8:1. See where this whole picture started and just imagine this scene. Nehemiah 8:1: *"When the seventh month came and the Israelites and settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man..."* It's great picture of unity. *"...all the people..."* Thousands...

...assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. From daybreak till noon, Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform, built for the occasion.

Beside him on his right stood a bunch of guys we don't know how to pronounce their names, and then, listen to this picture. Verse 5...get this in your mind. *"Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground."*

Can you imagine? Masses of people gathered together. Ezra steps up. All he does is he opens the book. Most likely the Law...first five books of the Old Testament. He opens it up. All he does is open it up. There's no guitar chord struck. The latest Christian worship hit has not come into the background and caused chills to come down people's spines. All he does is open the book, and everybody rises to their feet. They lift up their heads, and they start shouting, "Amen! Amen!" Then, they begin to bow down, and their faces are all over the ground. All he did was open the book. That's good. God, give us an awe for your Word, and they listened to it *"from daybreak till noon."* They didn't just listen; they listened attentively to it. No funny stories or entertaining humor from Ezra. Just the book, and they listened to it for hours.

I was joking with Dr. Shaddix last week. He had sent me an email in preparation for Sunday. He said, "David, we have two worship services. The first one you have about 45 minutes to preach." Then, he said, "The second one..." And this was like gold. He said, "And the second service, your time is..." This is the word he used: "...unlimited." You're like, "You don't tell our pastor 'unlimited', like you're in trouble." Unlimited. Shaddix knew what he was getting into. Shaddix was the one who taught me to preach long, just for the record. I...and it's a matter of conviction for him. Shaddix says, "You know, you want to produce Christian acts, then preach sermon acts. That's just what you do if you want to produce that. If you want to preach real followers of Christ, then..." yeah.

So, I want to thank you for your love for the Word. I want to thank you, this body of believers called The Church at Brook Hills, for your hunger for this Word. This whole, "If you have a Bible, and I hope you do" thing, that was not intentional. I don't know how exactly that started but I'm kind of stuck with it. I'm stuck with it because you come, and you've got the Word, and you're opening up. You're expecting to hear from it, and if you don't, you're mad. You're dissatisfied. There is a discontentment if the Word is not there, and I thank you for that. The privilege it is for me, as teacher of the Word, in that kind of community.

I was with some other pastors later this past week. Couple of them came up to me, and they said, "You preach 60 minutes?" I guess I have forgotten that that's not necessarily normal. So, you're thinking, "We could have reminded you." However, it is normal for our brothers and sisters around the world to be long in the Word. It's been normal for the people of God throughout history to be long in the Word, and I am thankful for what God has done in this body of believers, because He has designed this picture very clearly so

that...we've not had a senior pastor with a lot of experience to lean on. For that matter, we don't have a senior pastor with much to lean on at all, but we've got the Word, and it's good. It's what we're grounded in. So, I thank you, and I pray that in the days, months, years to come in this community of faith, He will ground us more and more, more and more in the Word. We're a community grounded in the Word.

We are a community sustained by the grace of God.

Second parallel: We are a community sustained by the grace of God. You get to Nehemiah 9 and what happens is, in response to the Word, they go into this time of confession and praise and prayer. Nehemiah 9:1, *"On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers."* Listen to this, *"They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter of the day in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God."* They're seeing, they're hearing, they're listening attentively to the book, to the Law, and they're seeing their sin exposed. It's why they're on their faces, and they're confessing sin.

Then, you get midway through verse 5. You've got all the Levites here and Ezra, and what they do is they *"stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting."* Thus begins midway, through verse 5 there, a prayer that goes all the way through verse 37. I want you to see what happens here. I want you to see where it begins. Listen to the beginning of this prayer. This is grand. *"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you."*

What a grand, glorious picture of God. They exalt Him for who He is, but this is where it gets even better. They give this grand picture of God in praise, and then they immediately begin to recount how this great God has been gracious to them throughout their history. What they do in this prayer is they look back at what this great God has done among them. Hear the grace, verse 7, *"You are the LORD God, who chose Abram..."* That's grace. This is not, "Abram did a tryout before you God and made the team." This is, "You chose, and you called his name *"and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Gergashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous."*

Listen to the compassion in these next verses. *"You saw the suffering our forefathers in Egypt..."* They were in slavery. *"...you heard their cry."* The God on High hears your cry.

You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of the land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.

You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them your word, regulations and laws that are just and right, decrees and

commands that are good. Your word is good and you gave it to us. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. 'In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

"When we were wandering in the desert, we had no food or water, you sent food from the sky and you caused water to come out of rocks. Grace, grace, grace. You have done all of these things."

However, then listen. Verse 16...God's great grace. How did they respond? *"But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery."* They said, "We want to go back." They yawned. They balked in the face of grace.

So, what did God do? After He had given them so much, and they rebelled against Him, what did God do? *"But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies. Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert."* This is what continues through the rest of this prayer. What it is is it's an interplay. It's a back and forth. God: Gracious. The people of God: Arrogant, disobedient. God's grace covering over their arrogance, then them disobeying again. You see it over and over again.

Verse 26, *"They were disobedient, rebelled against you..."* Right after verse 25, *"...they reveled in your great goodness."* You had been so good to him, and *"they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets..."* Verse 28, *"As soon as they were at rest..."* After He restored them again, *"...they again did what was evil in your sight."* Verse 29, *"You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances."* That's the back and forth.

It comes all the way to verse 32 and listen to what the prayer says. *"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love..."* He keeps His covenant of love; He sustains this covenant of love. *"...do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today."* All of that leads to verse 38, when they say, *"In view of all this..."* So, this agreement that they're making is an agreement, a covenant, made totally in the context of grace. They're saying, "The only reason we are a people who are still here is because your grace has gotten us here."

Now, it's at this point, I want to draw this parallel in a couple of key ways. The Church at Brook Hills, this local body of believers, is a community sustained by the grace of God. This church does not have hundreds of years of history to look back on. This church has less than twenty short years of history to look back on, but just under twenty years of abundant grace to look back on. This church has been through great highs and difficult lows. This body has been through great victory and grievous sin, and God's grace has sustained every step of the journey. The only reason there is a people today called The Church at Brook Hills is because of the grace of Almighty God. It's the only reason.

It is not because of any leader or any decision or any group or anything. It is nothing but the grace of Almighty God that has sustained this people, and that is absolutely huge for moving forward, because the last thing...especially when talking about the covenant...the last thing we would want to do as a community now is to say, "Okay, let's take a deep breath, and for the next twenty years, let's try to do this thing as best as we can. Let's muster it up and give it our best shot at being the church that we're supposed to be." That's the worst thing we could do because it's not about us giving it our best shot. It's about us being a people for the next twenty years, forty years until Christ comes back...being a people who are desperate for the grace of God to sustain us at every single moment, not just from the past but in the future.

The only way we can carry out the kind of commands that we see for the church of the New Testament is by the grace of God. It's the only way it can happen, not because we try harder, but because we are more desperate for grace, and He gives that grace time and time and time again, because we are all, every single one of us, even this pastor is prone to wander, prone to stumble, prone to leave the God we love, and not just to leave the God we love but prone to wander and stumble and leave each other. We need...every single one of us is radically dependent on grace to sustain, not just our individual Christian life, but the community of faith of which we are apart. Not drifting into some cheap grace, though, where we talk about grace all the time, where we comfort one another in sin, but we don't love one another enough to confront one another in sin. That's not the kind of grace the New Testament gives us.

The New Testament shows us a radical obedience to the commands of Christ, under girded by radical grace every step of the way. That's what the church is about. We're a community grounded in the Word of God, and sustained by the grace of God. As we talk about covenant in the next few weeks, I hope that you will see this whole picture as thoroughly saturated in the Word and completely sustained by His grace.

We are a community promoting the good of one another.

Third parallel, and we're going to move through this one pretty quickly. We're a community promoting the good of one another. You get to Nehemiah 10:28, you begin to see the specifics of this agreement, this covenant they have with one another. Nehemiah 10:28:

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.

What happens is, in the rest of this chapter, you see specifics. You see verse 30, how they're going to guard one another's purity, and then you see verse 31, how they're going to honor the Sabbath together. Verse 32, how they're going to worship together. Verse 34, how they're going to contribute to one another. The rest of this chapter, how they're going to provide one another, care for one another. All of this for each other's good.

They were clear about it. In the same way that every parent in this room wants to be clear with our children. I want to be clear with my sons what they can expect from me. The kind of love they can expect from me intangibly. How that's going to look. That they know and rely on that from me, and I don't want them to be fuzzy about that. And at the same time, I want them, as they grow, to be clear about what is expected of them in the context of our

family and what love looks like. I don't want them to be wandering around trying to figure out what love looks like. I want that to be clear. Every parent in this room wants that kind of picture in our family.

Well, then, why in the world, when it comes to the family of God and the faith family, would we want to be fuzzy about what it means to live and relate to one another? This...I want that to be clear. You ask the average Christian sitting in a pew or a seat of a church building today...ask the average Christian, "What does it mean to be a member of your church? What does it mean for you to be a member of the church that you're apart of?" You probably get all kinds of different answers. Probably some blank looks at first, and then, as people think about it, "Well, I think it means I can vote." "Okay, well, is there anything else?" Think about it and say, "Well, I think it means when they need volunteers, I get an email or a call, especially when they're really desperate." "Okay, is there anything else?" "Well, I don't know." Isn't it a good thing to be able to say when someone asks you and me, "What does it mean to be a member of the church you're apart of?" to say, "It means that I am committed to praying for the people around me; committed to bearing their burdens, sharing their joys, and I'm committed to edifying them with the way I speak and encouraging them with the example of my life. I am committed to worshiping with them and serving alongside them and accomplishing a mission with them. That's what it means for me to be a member apart of this church." That's a good thing.

It's good for us. It's good for a people. Think about it. To look around a body and to know this is a people that are committed to me, and I'm committed to them for the good of one another. We are a community promoting the good of one another.

We are a community demonstrating the glory of God.

Ultimately—this is the key— we are not just a community for the good of one another. We are not just community for community's sake. We're promoting the good of one another, but we are a community demonstrating the glory of God.

Fast forward to Nehemiah. We don't have time to dive deep into this, but go to Nehemiah 12:43. This is the passage we studied before as well. What happens is after this whole confession and prayer and praise, they decide to have a celebration. So, what they do, when you look back earlier in Nehemiah, all the nations around the city of Jerusalem, basically, were mocking these Israelites, the people of God, when they were saying they were going to rebuild these walls. They were like, "This is an incompetent people," and it was reflecting. They said, "Incompetent people, incompetent God. They can't rebuild these walls." One person even said earlier in the book of Nehemiah, in the surrounding nations said, "If they rebuild these walls, a fox could climb up on those walls and they'd come crumbling down. They are that incompetent."

So, what they do in Nehemiah 12 is they say, "We're going to have a celebration." Somebody has the idea, "Why don't we climb up on the walls?" So, that's what they do. The entire community of faith climbs up on the walls, and they start marching around the walls, singing. Listen to this picture, Nehemiah 12:43: "*And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.*" Not just joy, great joy. "*The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of their rejoicing in Jerusalem...*" Catch this, "*...could be heard far away.*" They were loud. Why? So that all of those communities and nations around them would know that what has happened among this people has happened according to glory of this great God, and He is not incompetent. He is glorious, and they made sure it was clear to all of those nations.

What God's doing...it's the whole point of the book of Nehemiah...He is restoring a people for the glory of His name. God, do it today in a new covenant community of faith called The Church at Brook Hills and in churches like that all over a church landscape where church is looked at as a country club or a cold institution or a religious organization. This is not what we are. We are a community of faith that has been called out and united by the grace of God to make His glory known in the culture around us, that people in Birmingham and in our country and in all nations would look at the picture of the church and say, "What a great God." That's worth raising the bar a bit and saying, "We want to be intentional. We want to be passionate about taking the picture of the New Testament church and displaying the glory of Christ best as we can."

It's what we looked at in Ephesians 1. We saw where a people, united by the grace of Christ, filled with the power of Christ, and commissioned for the glory of Christ. God is not making His glory known in the world today through individual lone rangers, super Christians represented around this room. He is making His glory known today through a people. He has always done it and will always do it through a people, not individuals, but through a people who are so radically committed to one another to His glory. This is the picture. That's how they'll know. It's when we live like this with one another that we have great power in proclaiming this gospel to the ends of the earth. If we do not live distinctly with one another, then we undercut our ability to proclaim this gospel to the ends of the earth. So, for the sake of the glory of God, we want to be a community that is clearly and radically committed to one another.

The Beginning of a Church Covenant ...

All of that leads to the beginning of a church covenant. In the coming weeks, what we're going to do is we're going to walk step by step through a picture of a church covenant for us as a body. I hope, as I mentioned, we are grounded in the Word of God and saturated by the grace of God. The picture is...based on what we've seen today at the very beginning of that... "As members of The Church at Brook Hills, we affirm this covenant with one another by God's grace for our good and ultimately for God's glory."

Now, the key word there is "affirm." Some of you might be wondering, "Is this going to be where we're going to, like, all have to come to the front and prick our fingers and sign in blood on a dotted line? Like, are we going to go weird and do..." It's not what this is about. It's not all what this is about. It's not about a one time sign on the dotted line. This is about who we are as a people and saying, "We affirm one another."

How can we do that continually? How can we continually keep this before us as a picture? The New Testament teaches us to do these things. We want to keep these things before us where we are, especially as new members are coming, we want to affirm them and say, "We are this to you. You can expect this from us, and we need this from you." For a community of faith to continually affirm one another in that way...I was meeting with small group leaders, and we were talking about this covenant, looking through it, and they were saying, "Yes, this is so helpful. I'm thinking about...this is what is supposed to go on in a small group in a community of believers." That's the thing. In a...in this room today, 4,000 people in these three worship gatherings will have gathered here.

Well, the reality is every member of this body is not going to pray for every other member of this body every single day. However, it's why it's important for us to gather together in communities where we know each other, and we know how to pray for each other. Where

we're sharing life with each other like that. Where we do have people that when they're carrying a burden, we're able to come alongside and carry that burden with them. When they have joy in their lives, we're able to share that joy with them, and when they begin wander from Christ, we're able to lovingly put our arms around them, point them toward Christ, and we need them to do the same thing in our lives.

This is not accomplished by sitting in an auditorium filled room, shoulder to shoulder with people once a week. This is accomplished in the context of sharing life with each other, and God, we need you to restore that kind of community to the picture of your church, your people today for our good, ultimately for God's glory and all by God's grace. God, make us a community deeper and deeper grounded in your Word, sustained totally by your grace, promoting one another's good and, ultimately, demonstrating your glory to the ends to the ends of the earth.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt & Radical. Website: Radical.net