

NEHEMIAH 10 | How Does Your Garden Grow?
Del Shimandle | November 1, 2020

Good morning, First Free Church, all of you in-person and online.

As I prepared for this sermon, I've been thinking about gardens. Remember the children's rhyme?

Mary, Mary, Quite contrary
How does your garden grow?

Gardens are amazing. When I see a new flower — one I've never seen before — I get gobsmacked. Do you remember the first time you ever saw and smelled a rose? Probably not, but I'm sure you can imagine how pleasing it was. But by the hundredth time you see a rose you don't notice as much. That's why we have the old adage "Stop and smell the roses!" We too quickly lose interest in even beautiful things. We are too easily bored. But you know who is not too easily bored with the beauty of a garden? Gardeners.

Ruth and I have friends down in Urbana who have a home on a 2 acre lot out in the country. They have a hobby farm with chickens and pigs, and an amazing garden with dozens, if not hundreds of different flowers, plants, vegetables and herbs. She's a doctor and he's a school administrator, so I don't know how they find the time. But it's a beautiful home/farm/garden.

While I enjoy the visual spectacle of colors and the smell of the flowers (the pigs, not so much), the pleasure lasts about 5 minutes. I can take a stroll through the property, smile in a sort of wonder, and then be like "Ok, so what do you want to do now? Pictionary maybe!?"

But our friends are like "Let's enjoy the garden! And, while we're here, let's pull some weeds."

Their appreciation for the beauty goes much deeper than mine, because they do the hard work to cultivate the garden!

Now, I told you that story, so I could tell you another one, about Revival. It's in the Bible.

But hang on to that idea about gardens, because it is related!

I'm going to read our text for today, then I'll pray, and then we'll dig in.

Before I read, I need to explain two things. First, for chapter 10 to make sense I will begin by reading the last verse in chapter 9. In the original Hebrew that verse is a link that grammatically ties the two sections together. In fact, you may have noticed in the sermons over the past couple of weeks that chapters 8, 9 and 10 are all part of one single unit. I'll explain more about that later...

Second, the first 27 verses of chapter 10 is a long list of names that I will leap-frog over in my reading for now. Make no mistake, the list is very important, and I will explain why later on. But for our present purposes of reading out loud, a long list of unfamiliar names might make it difficult to stay focused and attentive to the overall point of the passage.

Please turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah, chapter 10. But beginning with the last verse in chapter 9, verse 38, follow along as I read the Word of the LORD.

Nehemiah 9:38 - 10:39 (NIV)

38 “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”

[10:1-27 is the list of names which includes 23 priests, 17 Levites, and 44

“Leaders of the people.”

But for now, we shall continue with chapter 10, verse 28...]

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.

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 [firstfruits 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.”

This is God’s word! Please bow your heads with me as I pray.

O LORD, 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.

You made a covenant with Abraham, the Father of all who put their faith in you.
You gave the Torah through Moses, that it might go well with all who carefully obey your teachings.
You brought Israel up out of slavery.
You disciplined them for their faithfulness.
AND You kept your covenant and restored them from their Exile.

Restore and revive us too, O LORD.
Help us to understand and obey your Word.
Help us to worship You, as you deserve.

And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen!

So, you're wondering: What does Nehemiah 10 have to do with revival?
And what does revival have to do with gardening?

To understand that let us look at the big picture for a moment.
In chapters 1-7, God miraculously works in ways that fulfill His covenant promise to Israel.
Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with the support of King Artaxerxes.
Nehemiah casts the vision and motivates the people.
Against great opposition the walls of the city are rebuilt in just 52 days.

Chapters 8-10 form a single unit that shows Israel going through renewal and revival!

Chapter 8 begins with the people asking for Ezra to read the Torah, and ends with the re-institution of the Feast of Booths, which commemorates the wilderness wanderings after the LORD brought Israel out of Egypt.

In Jason's sermon last week on Chapter 9 he explained that it shows what Israel always does and, in contrast, what God always does. How Israel acts, and how God acts.

In a long prayer of confession and repentance, Israel admits that they always act wickedly and faithlessly. But they praise God He always acts faithfully, in rescue from Egypt, in rebuke for idolatry, and now in restoration from Exile!

Today, in chapter 10 we learn about what Israel does next. They've confessed. They've repented. And now they rededicate themselves. Look again at verse 28

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.

ALL of the people committed to following ALL of the Law of the LORD.

Now, in verses 30-39 they do not reiterate the entire contents of the Law that Moses brought down from the mountain. But instead they commit to four key areas that represent the entirety of the Law.

But first a word about the word "Law". "Law" in our English Bibles is the Hebrew word "Torah."

Torah does not mean we follow the Law in a legalistic sense in order to earn God's favor. Rather Torah in the Old Testament, literally translates as "teachings." And it encompasses a much larger meaning than rules and regulations in a legalistic sense.

The Torah is not about gaining the LORD's favor by obeying the commands.

How could it be, since the Law came **later**!?

The LORD covenanted with Abraham **before** the Law was given.

The LORD delivered Israel from Egypt **before** the Law was given.

The Law was not about gaining the LORD's favor. Rather Torah is best understood as something like: "the teachings of the LORD for living the blessed lives He has provided."

When these Israelites thought of the Torah they would have been thinking about the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 (excerpts):

4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ... 10 "And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, ... 12 then take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 13 It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. 14 You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you ... 17 You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you. 18 And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, **that it may go well with you...**"

(emphasis added)

We must not misunderstand the concept of the Law. The Torah... Israel's restoration and revival begin Chapter 8 with the reading of the Torah, and it concludes in chapter 10 with ALL of Israel (priests, Levites, and ALL the people) rededicating themselves to follow ALL of the Torah!

Note that the flourishing that the Torah provides can only occur with a commitment to follow!

Now, as I said the people don't go back and reiterate ALL of the Torah, but instead there are just four aspects in which this chapter demonstrates the Israelites cultivating this new commitment:

1) Set-apartness; 2) Sabbath; 3) Jubilee; and 4) Temple Worship.

Each of these topics could easily be a sermon in themselves. But I will only highlight them here as keys to the larger point of the passage.

- Set-apartness, in verse 30:
 - It means holiness, distinctness from the pagan kingdoms who worship false gods.
 - Intermarrying with non-Israelites was forbidden in the Torah not because of racism, but because of the temptation to be lured into idolatry, or worshipping false gods.
 - Today a relevant application of this point is politics. If you see any political party as a “home” then you are surrendering your call to set-apartness. The political world is NOT God's kingdom. Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as Queen Esther, Daniel and his three friends, are all clear OT examples that God's people are to live in a set-apart manner in the kingdoms of this world.
- Sabbath, in verse 31a:
 - The Sabbath was about resting from work as a sign of trust in the LORD's provision.
 - Here, they are resisting the temptation to make exceptions to the principle by having non-Israelites do work for them.
- Jubilee, in verse 31b:
 - The cancelling of debts and fallow lands was a Torah principle about caring for your neighbor, AND it was designed to repudiate the temptation of materialism and the idolatry of wealth.
- Temple Worship
 - The Temple Tax (v32-33)

- This was a new development, not in the Torah, but something the returnees committed to, knowing that Artaxerxes financial support only included the rebuilding of the city walls and gates.
- o Firstfruits offerings (v34-39)
 - “first” 5x; “tithe” 5x
 - “Firstfruits” means the crème-de-la-crème. The best of the best. The Torah stipulated that Israelites to give back to God the best fruits of their gardens as a reminder that all that they had was actually a gift from His own hand! It was an exercise in rejecting materialism and the idolatry of wealth.
- o Note that the phrase “the house of the LORD” occurs 10x in this chapter!
 - “House of the Lord” in OT refers to God’s presence with Israel. Pillar of cloud/fire over the Tabernacle in the wilderness. So also in the Temple...
 - However, we must remember that before the Exile God’s presence had left the Temple because of the people’s apostasy.
 - In the books of Ezra-Nehemiah God has brought the people back to the Promised Land and out of Exile as He promised.
 - BUT He has not yet re-indwelt the Temple!
 - Nehemiah 10, as well as the Old Testament itself, ends with a sense of incompleteness on purpose.
 - That is because Christ’s first advent is the long-looked for return of God’s presence!
 - Matthew tells us that Jesus is the one whose “name shall be called Immanuel, which means ‘God with us!’”
 - But not only among us, but also IN us!
 - In John 17:22-26, Jesus prays “22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. 25 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have

sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

- That means WE today, through faith in Christ, have access to something that Israel returned from Exile did not! The LORD no longer dwells in the Temple, but through faith in Christ, he dwells in us!
- You, disciple of Jesus, are a Temple of the LORD. You, church body, are a Temple of the LORD. You are not your own. Therefore, honor God with your body.

Now, as I said, each of these four Torah commitments could justifiably developed into their own sermon. But for our purposes today, we are only emphasizing how they are part of the main point of the passage.

The important overarching truth that you need to remember is this:

Revival is like gardening.

Renewal requires cultivation.

That is, hard work!

If we want to see spiritual fruitfulness in our lives, and if we want our church community to thrive, then, according to this passage, we must ALL rededicate ourselves to following ALL of the Torah, as Israel did.

Let me conclude by returning to stories about gardening.

We've been in our home in Jefferson Park now, for over 19 years. Ruth has cultivated a garden almost every year. There have been flowers, plants and herbs. But the good stuff is the stuff we get to eat. Tomatoes of all sorts, plumb, cherry, and big fat juicy reds, along with sweet peas, peppers, zucchini, and lots of rhubarb. Because of her efforts this past summer we have had a whole row of sunflowers over 10 feet tall, and she's drying out the heads to save the seeds for

future enjoyment. And we've enjoyed fresh tomatoes on burgers and sandwiches and in delicious soups. We've stocked up on rhubarb stalks for future pies. In fact, we just ate the final fresh strawberries from her garden last week, and it is OCTOBER!

But I have a confession to make. Personally, I don't like gardening. I like to see the beauty of our friend's garden down in Urbana. I love to eat the fruit of Ruth's labor from our back-yard. But I don't like getting dirt under my own fingernails. I mowed the lawn and trimmed the bushes yesterday, but if I had my "druthers" I wouldn't even get stuck doing that.

And I have a confession to make about my spiritual life: I tend to be just as reluctant there too. I don't naturally gravitate toward the hard work of spiritual renewal.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if we want to see God at work in our midst, if we hope to see growth and power in our own lives, if we want to see our church grow and thrive, if we hope to be blessed and to bless others, it is time to get some spiritual dirt under our fingernails. It is time to cultivate revival, through the reading of God's Word, confession and repentance, and following the Torah ways of the LORD.

In Nehemiah ALL of the people committed to following ALL of the Torah.

They set themselves apart to live in a way different from the world.

They trusted God for their daily bread by Sabbathing and resting on a regular basis.

They cancelled debts owed to them rather than idolizing wealth and materialism over concern for their brothers, sisters, and neighbors.

They attended to God's presence by financially supporting the Temple, and faithfully giving the firstfruits of their labor as an act of worship.

They studied the Scriptures, they confessed and repented, and then ALL the people committed to following ALL of the Torah. And because of Christ, we can, and we must, do the same.

When I read the passage earlier, I promised to come back to the long list of 82 names.

The names may seem insignificant to us since we don't know who these people were.

But THEY knew! Their names are ON THE RECORD.

These were the people who signed the covenant!

They committed to study the Word of God. To confess and repent. To follow ALL the Torah ways of God for revival, godly living and flourishing.

Let me read some of the names of those who signed their names!

Abbott. Lapse. Wilkin.

Snyder/Nuuhiwa. Einfeldt. Sattler. Esper.

Shimandle. Ramirez. Tallacksen.

Hower. Mercado. Lauener.

Oller. Dekker. Haas.

Korte. Ragsdale. Lee.

Malinak. Lim. Leonard.

Cha. Einfeldt. Munro.

Avila. Hill. Syllas.

Tallacksen. Halver. Patterson.

These are just a few of the names of people here at First Free Church who have signed their names by way of their deeds.

They serve faithfully in many ways. They cultivate spiritual renewal and revival through the study of the Scriptures, through habits of confession and repentance, and by committing to living out the Torah ways of the LORD in this church community and in this city.

What about you!?

It's time to get dirt under our fingernails. It's time to cultivate revival.

Will you rededicate yourself?

Israel could rededicate themselves to the Torah because the LORD had remained faithful and restored them. They did not commit to obey the Torah in order to **gain** His favor, they committed to obey the Torah because they were grateful that they already **had** His favor.

But all the more for we who have put our faith in Jesus Christ.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godly living, through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. He has given us His great and precious promises so that by them we may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world that is caused by evil desires. **Therefore** make every effort to add to your faith goodness, and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!