This is the ninth of eleven messages in the series of “Amazing Things Can Happen.” So far, we have learned how Amazing Things Can Happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, when we overcome antagonism, when we stop strife, when we stay steadfast, when we welcome joy, and when we confess. Today’s message is about the significance of being faithful and staying committed to God, so the title is “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Are Committed.”

Let’s do a quick review of the last couple of weeks. We have studied chapters 8 and 9 of the book of Nehemiah. In those chapters, we see the priest Ezra reading the Book of the Law to the people and their response. During that time, the people felt a strong conviction for their sins and the memory loss of who they were supposed to be. So, they wept and confessed and experienced the joy of reconciliation through God’s loving grace. Towards the end of chapter 9, they acknowledged saying “You have been just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly… we are in great distress.” (33-37)

Now, we come to chapter 10, where they make a covenant with God to stay committed to their faith and calling: to be faithful to what they believe and act on what they are meant to do.

Is this something that matters to you? How important is it for you to keep the faith you profess and act on it? These are critical questions because they help us understand what happened to the Israelites over time. They forgot their faith and compromised their identity as God’s people, leading them to “great distress and loss.” And that can happen to us too—and it probably has already.

This message will help us get back on track with our faith if we have lost our way and will provide a way to help us as we face challenges.

Here is what happened towards the end of chapter 9 as the people were moved to a place of deep conviction and decided to change and make things right,

“Because of all this we make a firm agreement in writing, and on that sealed document are inscribed the names of our officials, our Levites, and our priests.”

As we noted during the last two weeks, in chapters 8 and 9, God’s people were confronted with their sin and acknowledged their brokenness due to disregarding God’s Word. Then, after hearing and remembering what God wanted for them and confessing their rejection of God, they said, “Let’s make a firm agreement in writing, write our names on it, and seal it.”

What is going on here? These people are making a vow, taking an oath before God and each other to live up to their faith and calling as God’s people.

The meaning of this act is profound. Vow-making or oath-taking was a serious matter. The book of Numbers 30:2 explains, “When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” And Ecclesiastes 5:4 also says, “When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow.”

Making vows was a powerful commitment. But vows and oaths were often broken. There are examples in the Bible of people making covenants with God only to break them later.

As we are in the Lenten season, one example, in particular, is from the gospel of Mark 14:29, where Peter promises Jesus that he will not abandon him by saying, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” Only to break his vow hours later when a girl questioned him, saying, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” But he denied it, and as he was also confronted by those around, “[H]e began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” (67)

This leads me to a question: Are vows good? Do they have any use when it seems we can hardly keep them? I think they serve two practical purposes: they help us commit and express our love. Think of what happens and what we say when we marry someone: “I will be with you through everything—the good, bad and ugly—till death do us apart.” Who, in their right mind, would commit to someone in such a matter for the rest of their lives? Well, someone that loves deep from the heart.

Vows, therefore, are an expression of our aspirations and loyalty, and we make them out of deep regard and love. Vows are important and helpful because they remind us of the kind of person we ought to be and our hope for seeing things we anticipate. They keep us on track and focused and help us find ourselves when we lose our way.

These vows are not the kind that we make lightly or all the time for petty reasons, “God if you give me this, I promise I will…” And these are different from seasonal commitments that we make that may change over time, like, “I commit to serve on mission trips…” I mean, there comes an age when that is not possible anymore.

The vows being taken in Nehemiah 10 are not seasonal or petty. Instead, they are a consecration for life. This is not meaningful because it is their first time doing such a thing— in reality, they had done this before many times and broken their commitment—but because now they honestly wanted to get back on track. So, they made an agreement, wrote their names on it, and sealed it. They were, in practical terms, recommitting themselves to God and each other because they remembered their faith and identity.

Now, what were their vows? The first vow was about relationships, particularly regarding marriage, “We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.” (30)

Back then, the parents made the marriage arrangements for their children. They decided who their children would marry. If this covenant were made today, it would be directed to individuals seeking a husband or wife. This was a critical component of their faith because they believed who you marry defines you as a person for the rest of your life. After all, it binds your whole self to the whole self of another person.

With this in mind, their vow was not discriminating against others, but an acknowledgment of the seriousness in choosing who to marry. Once you bind yourself to another, may God be honored through that relationship? And that is what speaks to us today.

Whether you are married, seeking to get married, or praying for a spouse, make sure to keep your faith and honor God with your decisions. If none of these apply to you, it does not release you from commitment because this is about faithful relationships. So, be a good Christian to those in your life and around you. That is a powerful vow to make.

The second vow was about profiting by doing business out of business hours, so to speak, “[A]nd if the peoples of the land bring in merchandise or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy it from them on the sabbath or on a holy day; and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.” (31)

These people lived under the law of Moses, where God instructed them not to buy or sell anything on the sabbath day. Yet, they broke this commandment for many years because they wanted to make more money.

I know the law of Moses does not bind us, but there is something here that has value for us. For them, honoring God with their money was vowing not to sell or buy anything on the sabbath day. For us, honoring God through our work means not cutting corners, cheating, defrauding, taking advantage of others, or profiting from unjust and oppressive practices. Having a sabbath was about resting and worshiping God in the Temple but also about letting go of greed. In practical terms, they were making a vow to honor God with their work and their money.

How would you honor God with your work and money? What would you do? What would you change from what you are doing today?

This leads to the third vow they made regarding their commitment to the Temple, the house of God: “We also lay on ourselves the obligation to charge ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the rows of bread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed festivals, the sacred donations, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.” (32-33)

For too long, these people had been poor stewards of God’s work, failing to provide to the needs of the Temple and the work the priests and Levites did to serve the community. Their faith was the source of their spiritual, mental, and emotional wellbeing, but they had left it unattended. But now, they were realizing their failures and made generous amendments.

I know talking about money in church is sometimes a touchy subject because many have horribly abused this for personal gain. But let that not misguide us into believing that money and how we use it does not matter because it does. On the contrary, money is sacred because it is the fruit of the labor God has provided to us. We feed and clothe our family and do many things that bring us happiness with it. It is also a powerful resource to provide for the needs of others, particularly those suffering.

For example, as a church, we serve those who come to worship and those in our community. We make things better today by investing in people’s lives for a better future through the wise use of money. A lot of people don’t see all the good that happens because of the work of the church, but we are constantly planting seeds of goodness that change people’s lives for a better future.

However, money can also be a source of many evils if greed leads us. This is why these people were making this vow because they knew they had failed to honor God with their money. They were led by greed for many years, but now they were finding their way back to their faith.

How does this speak to you? Does greed lead you with your money, or do you treat it as a sacred gift to honor God, your family, and yourself?

The last point I want to make is that even when we break our vows and fail in our commitment, God keeps it. Think about it. The Israelites broke the covenants (yes, plural), but God continued to be with them. I am talking about the covenants with Abraham, Moses, including the Ten Commandments, and King David and Solomon. So many of these commitments were broken by the people, yet kept by God.

If you have let God down for more than once, please be encouraged. If you have broken your vows or commitments to God, please know that God is still keeping his to you. That is our hope and encouragement: that God is steadfast. God stays with us even when we forsake him and forget about him.

That is the good news for us today! Hardly do we deserve anything, but yet God gives us everything out of grace. Grace is the new covenant God made with us through Jesus Christ: to save and have us through grace. And, in this new covenant, we are not moved by fear or religious duty but by love and gratitude. As it says in 1 John 4:18-19, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.”

Knowing that we are loved in such an extravagant way should give us all the confidence we need to know we will be ok because God will never let go of us—even if we do let go of him.

This is the invitation and challenge for us today: How would you practice your love for God in your relationships, money, and faith? What would you say if you were to make a vow, a commitment to God today?

Well, do it, just be thoughtful! Then make an effort to live up to that decision in your heart by committing to God. Even if you keep slipping or failing with this vow, stay on it, and you will see that amazing things can happen when we are committed.

May you express your love through your commitments.