

Week 3: Covenants of Alignment and Priority

I. Intro: Covenants Only Work from the Inside Out

The Difference Between Descending or Ascending Motivations

Kenyon Wilson, a professor at the University of Tennessee, wanted to test whether any of his students fully read the syllabus for his music seminar. Of the more than 70 students enrolled in the class, none apparently did. Wilson said he knows this because on the second page of the three-page syllabus he included the location and combination to a locker, inside of which was a \$50 cash prize. But when the semester ended on December 8, students went home and the cash was unclaimed. Wilson wrote on Facebook “My semester-long experiment has come to an end. Today I retrieved the unclaimed treasure.”

Wilson said he wanted to include the hidden clues to brighten up the semester during the pandemic. “Teaching in a pandemic, I’m trying to do creative things and, you know, make it interesting. The syllabus is a really dry document, but I thought if my students are reading it, I might as well reward them.”

Tanner Swoyer, a senior studying instrumental music education, said that he felt “pretty dumb, pretty stupid” when he saw the professor’s post about the money in the locker.

HAD THE STUDENTS ONLY KNOWN THAT IN THE SYLLABUS THERE WAS SOMETHING THEY CONSIDERED VALUABLE, THEY WOULD HAVE ANALYZED EVERY WORD...BUT BECAUSE THEY ONLY THOUGHT IT WAS SOMETHING BEING IMPOSED UPON THEM AND NOT SOMETHING THEY WERE BEING INVITED INTO, NONE OF THEM LOOKED ALL THAT CLOSELY.

We intrinsically understand that when rules DESCEND upon us we might comply with them, but we rarely become passionate about them...because they’re landing on us, that’s the nature of the direction

- See speed limits, HOA bylaws, or most dress codes
- And many of us do not abide by these laws/rules, or we find ways around them

But ASCENDING COMMITMENTS ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM DESCENDING COMMANDS because they are originating in something that’s happening internally, not something that’s happening externally!

- When we stay up all night with a sick child we don’t do that because Dr. Spock or Heidi Murkoff (“what to expect” books) told us we had to – the motivation comes from a different place, it ASCENDS from within!
- When we stand at an altar and promise to “love, honor and cherish, till death do we part” we are in NO WAY viewing that promise with the same restrictive feeling as a sign that tells us we can only drive 55 mph! – our marriage vows ascend from deeper places than the statehouse or the courthouse!
- And while marriage vows and our parenting responsibilities are not always perfectly kept, their ORIGINATION POINT is infinitely different from traffic laws, grass cutting schedules and casual Fridays!

We’re talking about COVENANT so we are not talking about set of rules that have been imposed upon us, we’re talking about a collection of commitments we’re choosing to walk in

- This means that COVENANT is not an external thing, it is an internal thing
- This means that the one requirement for successfully walking in Covenant is a transformed and hungry heart... because it’s an internal commitment not an external command.

I start here because the two categorical covenants Nehemiah leads the people into are not quiet as popular and require something more than just a willingness to “follow the rules.”

- In practical terms we are talking about schedules and money
- In spiritual terms we are talking about trust and priority

IF WE ARE GOING TO SEE OUR LIVES CHANGED IN PRACTICAL WAYS, THERE HAS TO BE AN INNER TRANSFORMATION AT WORK. BECAUSE MOST OF US FEEL LIKE OUR TIME AND OUR MONEY ARE TWO AREAS WHERE WE ACTUALLY GET TO BE IN CONTROL...SO THESE TWO ASPECTS OF COVENANT ARE ENCROACHING IN AREAS WE TEND TO BE VERY PROTECTIVE OF.

(Just a friendly warning)

- But can I just say, it's often the very places where we're least comfortable surrendering that we find the most freedom when we do.
 - o Jesus tells the man to extend his withered hand...
 - o Jesus tells Zacheaus that they're not going to the temple, their going to his house...
 - o Jesus instructs the mourners at Bethany to remove the stone and expose the stench of the loss of their friend!

IF WE NEVER WALK IN PLACES OF UNCOMFORTABLE SURRENDER, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT WE WILL EVER WALK IN PLACES OF UNCOMMON INCREASE.

II. Covenant of Alignment – Nehemiah 10:31

Nehemiah 10:31

³¹ And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy 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.

WE NEED TO ADOPT A WAY OF LIFE THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH THE WAY GOD CREATED THE WORLD TO WORK.

GOD DIDN'T CREATE THE WORLD TO BE LIVED AT THE EDGE OF THE MARGINS OF TIME, ENERGY OR SELF-SUFFICIENCY...HE INSTALLED A BREAK IN THE CYCLE, AND HE DID THIS FOR A PURPOSE.

- **We've talked about margins before, but it bears repeating**
- **If you write or type a letter without leaving any room on the edges at all, your letter looks like a serial killer wrote it 😊**
- **WE LEAVE A LITTLE ROOM ON THE EDGES SO THE MIDDLE MAKES MORE SENSE!**
 - a. Three things are mentioned here: Weekly Sabbath (and holy days), 7 year cycle of letting the ground rest, and the radical elimination of debts consistent with the Year of Jubilee.

They made a covenant that they wouldn't do:

- commerce
- agriculture
- economics

Like the rest of the world.

This is not just about taking a day off.

This is about aligning our life with a rhythm that trusts God where the world chooses to trust itself.

b. Sabbath Culture is Not Just “Day Off” Culture

- i. To oversimplify the deep texture of Sabbath is to misunderstand the order of Creation itself!
- ii. What’s fascinating about this part of the covenant is that Sabbath here is not simply seen as a time to rest, but as a time to reject the opportunity for 7th day acquisition
 1. Look closely...Nehemiah isn’t just satisfied to pray and nap
 2. He is clear: THERE MUST BE REGULAR MOMENTS IN OUR LIVES WHEN WE ACTIVELY CHOOSE TO RELY ON WHAT GOD HAS PROVIDED, NOT ON WHAT WE HAVE THE RESOURCES OR STRENGTH TO ACQUIRE.

c. Sabbath Culture Didn’t Begin With the Law, it Began at Creation

- i. It’s important to see that God didn’t command Sabbath before He created and practiced it...so this didn’t begin as a rule, it began as a rhythm of Creation when the world was still perfect!

Genesis 2:2-3

²And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

THIS IS WHY I’VE CALLED THIS A COVENANT OF ALIGNMENT...BECAUSE WE’RE NOT TALKING ABOUT SAYING YES OR NO TO A LAW, BUT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT CHOOSING WHETHER OR NOT WE’RE GOING TO LIVE ALIGNED WITH THE PATTERN IN WHICH THE WORLD WAS MADE TO WORK BEST!

- ii. Also, to help see the point of Nehemiah’s covenant:
 1. The word used in Genesis, Sabbath, does not mean “rest” – which might come as a surprise to some, because that’s how we typically think of Sabbath
 2. The word’s definition means “to cease.”
 - a. Nehemiah says that purchasing and regular life had to cease every 7 days.
 - b. He said the fields needed to be able to cease their production every 7 years.
 - c. And he said all payment of debts needed to cease every 50 years.
 3. YOU CANNOT HAVE REST IF YOU DON’T EVER CEASE!
 - a. The Bible says that God rested BECAUSE He stopped.
 - b. Should we believe anything different about ourselves?

Albert Schweitzer on the Sabbath

“If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan.”

A significant part of the purpose of Sabbath-Ceasing is not just resting our bodies, or resting our lands, or resting our financial burdens...it is about knowing that we are not our own fathers, we are not the ones keeping the earth spinning, we are not the ones who have to carry all the weight of our existence on our shoulders – we need a rhythm of remembering that God is still enough or else we will be tempted to believe that we are the load-bearing point of eternity.

SO HERE’S THE TEMPTATION: OKAY, KRIS, WE UNDERSTAND, WE’VE GOTTA STOP IF WE REALLY WANT TO GO, OR HOWEVER A PREACHER WOULD SAY IT ☺

- But there’s a passage in Exodus, a wilderness passage – which for some of us makes it instantly more relevant because we not only feel like we are carrying the weight of the world, we feel like we’re doing some wandering in desolate places at the same time!

Exodus 16:4-5

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.”

6th Day Manna

So immediately we have some history behind this very specific covenant – we see it in Exodus 16.

When the Children of Israel were walking in the wilderness God fed them MIRACULOUSLY for 40 years!

But a part of this miracle that lasted 4 decades was this instruction: you cannot gather more than you need for one day, except on the 6th day, then you should gather enough for two days.

- The consequences of disobeying this instruction were quickly understood
- If you had manna left over on days 1-6 of the week, the bread would spoil before the next morning (you couldn't horde resources without the losing their usefulness)
- On the 7th day, the balance was different – same bread, same baskets, same hungry bellies – BECAUSE BUT GOD SAID THIS DAY WAS DIFFERENT, THE MANNA DID NOT SPOIL ON THE 2ND DAY OF USE!

6TH DAY MANNA WASN'T DIFFERENT IN SUBSTANCE, BUT IT WAS DIFFERENT IN IT'S PURPOSE.

- God said, when I speak an identity over something, that word supersedes all other identities (which is a beautiful thing in so many ways).
- But all of this points back to the idea of Sabbath...the day God declared as a day when everything else ceases EXCEPT HIS PROVISION!
 - o God said to His people in the wilderness, “if you'll obey Me, you'll see that I'm the God who can provide for you, sustain the provision, and give you an opportunity to rest in My care over your life!”
 - o What happens when they obey God's instruction, when they align themselves with the way God created the order of creation to work was this: AS THEY LEFT SPACE OPEN IN THEIR LIFE GOD FILLED IT WITH HIS MIRACULOUS WORK.

THE GREATEST CONSEQUENCE OF NEVER STOPPING OUR OWN EFFORTS, OUR OWN WORK, OR OUR OWN STRATEGIES IS THAT WE NEVER LEAVE ROOM FOR GOD TO DO ANYTHING MIRACULOUS IN OUR LIFE!

- Some of us have spent an enormous amount of time and effort trying to be our own savior
- So much so that we haven't left any room for the real Savior to squeeze in with His might and His power!

SO IS IT ANY WONDER THAT NEHEMIAH, EVEN THOUGH HE HAS RECOMMENDED THEM TO WALK IN THE LAW OF GOD (WHICH INCLUDES THE COMMANDMENT OF SABBATH), REITERATES THIS IN THE COVENANT?

- They needed to know, coming out of exile, that they were not the reason Jerusalem was going to be alright...God was.
- They needed to live in a rhythm of life that continually reminded them that it wasn't their work, their businesses or their efforts that were ultimately sustaining their lives...it was God.

Why? BECAUSE WHEN WE BEGIN TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE THE REASON EVERYTHING IS ALRIGHT, WE WILL EVENTUALLY BE CRUSHED BY THE WEIGHT OF BELIEVING WE ARE THE REASON EVERYTHING IS ALRIGHT.

The Sabbath at first seems like a command to keep a day of rest, but what it actually becomes in our life is a day faith.

We are not saying 6 days is enough, we're saying that obeying God:

- aligns us with the way that the world was created to work
- Gives us the opportunity to walk in rested sufficiency instead of exhausted prosperity
- helps us know when to close the gates so we can worship, instead of living endlessly bombarded by the pressures of the world's systems of self.

COVENANT OF ALIGNMENT:

I WILL CHOOSE TO LIVE MY LIFE BY FAITH, ALIGNED WITH GOD'S CREATED AND REVEALED ORDER, SO THERE IS ROOM FOR HEAVEN'S MIRACULOUS PROVISION TO BE PRESENT.

III. Covenant of Priority – Nehemiah 10:32-39

Nehemiah 10:32-39

³²“We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel^[s] for the service of the house of our God:³³ for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.³⁴ We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law.

³⁵ We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; ³⁶ also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; ³⁷ and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. ³⁸ And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse.

How fascinating is it that the law of God, the protection of the culture of worship and keeping the Sabbath only needed ONE verse each...but when Nehemiah started talking about money it took 7?

- **Think this is coincidence?**
- **Not a chance.**

YOU WILL KNOW GOD HAS YOUR HEART WHEN YOU SEE THAT HE HAS YOUR WALLET.

We will become people of right priority when we adopt a right perspective. Until we see everything we have as a gift to be stewarded, we will hold on to it like a ransom for our peace.

Writing in the Atlantic, author and researcher Arthur C. Brooks says, “Money is one of the things Americans worry about most in the world.”

One survey found that even when the US economy is thriving more than half of Americans felt anxious or insecure about money sometimes, often, or all the time. And during the COVID pandemic, another survey found that workers were almost five times more likely to worry about money than their health.

But many of us really don't need to worry about money. Only 11 percent of Americans live in poverty. And yet, according to a recent survey, more than half of Millennials with a net worth greater than \$1 million feared losing their wealth "a great deal" or "somewhat," as did more than a third of similarly wealthy Baby Boomers.

Brooks concludes, "For millions of people, then, worrying about money is not a reflection of whether their basic needs are being met. In fact, this anxiety reflects deeper concerns that money can't solve."

- Arthur C. Brooks, "What You're Really Worried About When You're Worried About Money," The Atlantic (12-9-21)

a. There are two major parts to this covenant (Nehemiah 10:32-38)

i. The Establishment of an Annual Contribution (Neh. 10:32-34)

1. A type of tax was established for the continuation of the work of the Temple
2. They pledged to fund the materials necessary for the regular function of the house of God
3. They were going to make sure that there was no lack of finances nor scarcity of resources that would ever interrupt the work of the Temple
4. They committed to maintain the function and upkeep of the place of worship

AS FAR AS IT SEEMS, THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THIS 1/3 OF A SHEKEL REQUIREMENT WAS MENTIONED...NEHEMIAH ESTABLISHED THIS AS **HE WAS RESPONDING TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD TO**

- **RETURN THE PEOPLE FROM EXILE TO JERUSALEM**
- **REESTABLISH THE TEMPLE AND THE WORSHIP OF YAHWEH**
- **REBUILD THE WALL AROUND THE CITY FOR PROTECTION AND COMPLETION**

THERE IS AN INTERESTING PRINCIPLE HERE: IF YOU WANT TO WALK IN THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S RESTORATION, IT'S NOT UNWISE TO COMMIT TO LIVING IN A RADICALLY DIFFERENT WAY.

Where Your Treasure Is...

Suppose you buy shares of General Motors. What happens? You suddenly develop interest in GM. You check the financial pages. You see a magazine article about GM and read every word, even though a month ago you would have passed right over it. Suppose you're giving to help African children with AIDS. When you see an article on the subject, you're hooked. If you're sending money to plant churches in India and an earthquake hits India, you watch the news and fervently pray ...

Do you wish you cared more about eternal things? Then reallocate some of your money, maybe most of your money, from temporal things to eternal things. Put your resources, your assets, your money and possessions, your time and talents and energies into the things of God. Watch what happens. As surely as the compass needle follows north, your heart will follow your treasure. Money leads; hearts follow.

- Randy Alcorn; "Where's Your Heart?" Eternal Perspectives Ministry blog (5-11-16)

ii. The Return to an Understood Expectation (Neh. 10:35-38)

1. This was a recapturing of the original commands and culture of Israel in financial terms
2. They made a covenant to tithe again,
 - a. which was established by Abraham and then normalized as a command under the leadership of Moses after the Egyptian liberation
 - b. 10% of whatever their land and fields produced was the way this worked in a primarily agrarian culture
3. They reinstated the practice of giving the first fruits and firstborn offerings

b. There is One Interesting Statement that Seals This Commitment (Nehemiah 10:39)

Nehemiah 10:39

³⁹For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

- i. After the financial commitment is laid out, Nehemiah puts an interesting cap on the whole thing:
- ii. There are four specific groups/functions he mentions...and all four of them reveal something of what was so important:
 1. The Vessels – the containers that held the oil
 2. The Priests – those who interceded on behalf of the people, who led the sacrifices and maintained the place of worship
 3. The Gatekeepers – those who protected what was most valuable to the place of worship
 4. The Singers – those who led the people in worship and into the presence of the Lord

NEHEMIAH SAYS: ALL THE CONTRIBUTIONS ARE TO BE BROUGHT TO WHERE:

- THE ANOINTING IS FRESH
- THE INTERCESSION IS CURRENT
- THE TREASURE IS SAFE
- THE WORSHIP IS CONTINUAL

AND THAT IS WHEN HE SAYS: “WE WILL NOT NEGLECT THE HOUSE OF OUR GOD.”
NEHEMIAH ISN’T JUST TRYING TO KEEP A BUILDING INTACT (THOUGH THAT IS UNDENIABLY PART OF THIS)...HE IS PASSIONATE CONSUMED WITH KEEPING THE CULTURE OF WORSHIP AND PRAYER AND VALUE AND PURPOSE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE PEOPLE’S LIVES!

We are tempted to see ourselves as owners of things.

We are invited to see ourselves as stewards of things.

The difference between an owner and a steward: the willingness to obediently release what is in our hand.

Eating the Seed Instead of Planting It

When Beth Moore and her husband, Keith, spent time in war-torn Angola to draw attention to tens of thousands of malnourished people, they were changed forever. "I learned something in one of the rural villages that will mark my teaching and response to the Word of God," Beth says. "As we stood there, trying to absorb the sights and smells of living death, our new friend, Isak Pretorius, said, 'One of the most frustrating things is that in villages where they received seed, they often eat the seed rather than planting it and bringing forth the

harvest. ' I couldn't get the statement out of my mind and suddenly had an answer to the question I most often ask God: Why do some people see the results of the Word and others don't?'"

And the way that practically happens is through one of the most sensitive areas we ever talk about in church: money.

- Nehemiah tells us that if we are not willing to prioritize the spiritual center of our life, then we will lose the cultural difference that God's people are supposed to maintain.
- Nehemiah tells us that if we only generous toward needs, but not faithful in our plans to give then we are not actually prioritizing the place or people we've been welcomed into by grace.
- Nehemiah tells us implicitly that the way we should see all of our resources is through the lens of stewardship, not ownership, so we don't hesitate to give both generously and faithfully.

COVENANT OF PRIORITY

I WILL SEE WHAT I HAVE AS THAT WHICH GOD HAS GIVEN ME, AND THEN I WILL PRIORITIZE MY STEWARDSHIP ACCORDING TO FAITHFULNESS AND GENEROUSITY.