

# THE VOW-MAKERS

## *SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH*

Steve Zeisler

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In October 1932, some members of the freshman football team at Stanford met together in hard circumstances. The Stanford varsity was in one of its not-infrequent periods of doldrums. This group of freshmen got together after the varsity had lost to USC for the fifth straight time. Let me quote from a history of Stanford athletics:

*On the Monday following the varsity's embarrassing loss to USC, quarterback Frank Alustiza gathered the rest of the freshman team around him. "They will never do that to us," Alustiza said. "We'll never lose to USC." "Let's make that a vow," shouted halfback "Bones" Hamilton. They did, and the vow was fulfilled by three consecutive wins over USC. (1).*

It turns out that this team was also good enough to win the conference championship three times in a row and to be the first team to play in three consecutive Rose Bowls. They are known in Stanford lore as the Vow Boys.

The making of vows, the stern declaration that things will be different this time, drawing on one's inner resources to change the future, is a familiar experience. The unusual thing about this vow, however, is that they fulfilled it. I've been on football teams that have done exactly the same thing: We had a team meeting, furrowed our brows, vowed that this year it would be different. "All for one and one for all!" But we didn't do any better than we had the year before.

The problem with making vows or stern statements of intention, speaking in ringing terms that call for changes to be effected in the future, is that we don't have access to the places deep inside us where the changes need to be made. We can't overcome our fears, strengthen what is feeble, or substitute humility for self-importance. That's why we need a Savior. God needs to intervene to make us different at the deepest levels.

### **Vows we can't keep**

Let me go back over some examples of vow-making, purpose statements, or declarations of conviction in the Bible. Exodus 24:3-7:

**"When Moses went and told the people all the LORD'S words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the LORD has said we will do.' Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.**

**He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.'"**

But in less than six weeks, those people who had called out the quality of their obedience in one voice accomplished the most spectacular breaking of the law in Israel's history: the making of the golden calf under Aaron's acquiescence, if not leadership, and the bacchanalian worship of an idol.

Mark 14:27-29 is another example:

**"'You will all fall away,' Jesus told them, 'for it is written:  
'I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be scattered.'  
But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.'  
Peter declared, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'"**

Just hours later Peter was running in terror and swearing at the threats of a servant girl who called him an associate of Jesus. His firm statement of conviction and intention fell by the wayside in short order.

We can't change the weaknesses in us that we so much want to change when we speak of our intention to do what God wants us to do. So it might occur to us to ask, Are vows of any use? Do the gathering together of our best hopes, stating firmness of purpose, setting ourselves in a certain direction, and calling on others to witness it play any positive role at all? I think the answer is yes.

We can be helped by insight from the book of Nehemiah. We're going to cover most of chapters 10-11 in this message. There's a long list of names that we won't take the time to read, but we will consider the narrative sections. This text concerns the making of a vow by Nehemiah and the people of Israel. We'll learn some positive things from their experience.

As we have seen, this book is the story of the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. The city walls were built, and the people found themselves built up in their faith. Not only did they do the work of God, they fell in love with God's presence. In chapter 8 the public worship and joyful responsiveness to God and the power of the Spirit poured out on the city were certainly a high point in this book and one of the high points in Israel's history. But immediately after this experience of worship, awareness dawned on the leadership that they were the kind of people who would lose what they had gained. Just like their fathers, they were "prone to wander," (2 ) in the words of the old hymn. They expected that there would come a day when they, too, would fall away and prefer themselves to God.

So there is a long prayer in chapter 9 that we considered in the last message, in which they admitted weakness. There is almost an audible sigh in verse 37 as the prayer ends with these words: "We are in great distress."

Finally, then, they make a firm declaration of purpose beginning in verse 38 of chapter 9:

**"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."**

Chapter 10 opens a long list of all the people who sign this document up to verse 29:

**"...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."**

Now, this has overtones of what the Israelites said with one voice at the foot of Mount Sinai when they heard the law for the first time: "What God calls on us to do is what we will do."

The curses were enumerated, the blessings were longed for. The document was signed and sealed, witnessed by all. Let me anticipate the end of the story for you. There were three specific things from the law that were the subject of their vow. And by chapter 13, after some years have passed, we will find that they were not able to keep any of them. Not surprisingly, they were like every other generation of human beings before and after them.

### **Getting specific**

Again, we might ask if there is value in these firm declarations.

Before we look at the content of this vow, let's consider two important themes or values that come from the making of vows. The first one is focus. Vows are made about something specific. In my experience, the vague inclination to do better is one of the great environments for faithlessness and loss of spiritual life. My sense is that I should probably improve in something before too much time goes by. The vagary of such unspecific wishing before the Lord allows us to never attempt anything, never believe anything, never face anything. But if you're going to make a vow, you use language that is both serious and specific.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and said, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said that he had kept all the commandments from his youth. Jesus said to him, "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Luke 18:18-25.) The Lord picked the one thing that the young man was unwilling to do. When discipleship got specific, he learned lessons about himself that he never would have learned otherwise.

Some of us have to get specific about drug or alcohol abuse, or an inability to control our spending. Some want to become more faithful in their devotional life. "Lord, I'm going to start reading the Bible every day, and I'm going to start reading it in the morning, and I'm going to start with this chapter, and I'm going to read three chapters a day, and it will be accompanied with this particular devotional. You have heard me say it, and I've heard myself say it, and I'm 'fixing my seal' to it. This is what my intentions are."

Our consciences are awakened when we're specific about what we intend, and the possibility of fulfilling it or being called to account by the Spirit of God when we don't is much greater. We can say, "Lord, I need to witness more," versus, "I need to invite this neighbor to this concert where the gospel will be presented. I need to give this book to this person as a gift on this occasion so that I can open up a conversation." The declaration of a vow makes us say something precise, and that invites God to walk alongside us in those particular issues.

The second value of the making of vows is even more important.

### **Using the language of love**

Vows are always the language of love. The center of a marriage ceremony is the declaring of vows between a man and woman who love each other.

Recently Leslie and I were privileged to be invited to Leo and Lorraine Guidi's 50th anniversary celebration. It was a party in a beautiful setting with music and food, friends and family. But at the center of the event, Leo and Lorraine stood before everyone, and with firm voices said to each other, "I'm committed to you for the rest of my life. I will put you before myself. I will honor and cherish and respect you. I have had the privilege of doing so for 50 years, and I will do so for as many more years as God gives us."

The making of a vow, the offering of language like that to someone, is a way to say you love them. Lovers need to be serious. They express their love not just as inarticulate feelings but as specific statements of what's in their heart for one another, commitments they're willing to make to one another. And making vows to do what God wants us to do is, for most of us, love language expressed to him.

One of the most complex and often-discussed theological passages in the New Testament is found in Romans 7. Let's read verses 18b-22. Paul is writing about his experience of wrestling with God:

**"I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.**

**So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law...."**

This passage notes that as deep as I can go inside of me, my spirit is knit together with the Spirit of God. I am his

child, and I know I love him. Remember Peter's words to the Lord on the seashore after the resurrection: "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." (John 21:17.) I know the things that matter to God, and I want to offer myself to do the things that matter to him. In my innermost being, I delight in God's law. I very often want to use love language to express that to him. But I am inevitably weakened in my ability to carry it out. "I need to tell you, Lord, that I do love you, and I'm committing myself to do this even with some knowledge that I'll fail. I don't know how else to say I love you than to take up what matters to you and be serious about what you're serious about, to agree with you about myself and head off in the right direction." Vows are the language of love, and they give us ways to articulate what is true deep inside.

Remember in Mark 9 the account of the man whose son was demonized. Jesus' disciples couldn't cast out the demon. The child was being thrown to the ground and at times put in danger of fire or drowning as these demonic attacks overcame him. Finally Jesus came on the scene and the man called out to him, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (verse 24). It is true that I believe. It is also true that I don't believe. A vow to obey is often the best way to tell the Lord we love him.

As I said, there were three specific vows that the people in Nehemiah's time made. They concerned marriage, Sabbath-keeping, and provision of what was needed for temple worship. The content of the promise they made begins in 10:30-33:

**"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.**

**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.**

**We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God."**

It goes on in further discussion of what is required for the temple to be the functional heart of the people of God in Israel again. At the very end of that paragraph, in verse 39b, it's summed up:

**"We will not neglect the house of our God."**

What might we learn by analogy from these three things? Let's look at the first issue, not intermarrying with other peoples, in verse 30.

### **Preserving God's place in our lives**

We live in a time of heightened awareness of ethnic division. The majority of us have been sensitized about not building barriers between people unnecessarily, not putting people in the "other" camp and allowing differences between people to seem significant when they're not.

But that's not what verse 30 is about. It is not about ethnic pride, a sense that the Israelite gene pool was superior to that of other peoples. Rather, it had to do with how they worshiped God and honored him. There was no such thing in ancient times as marriage without a clear invitation for the god or gods of the people involved to be at the center of the marriage-making (in fact, anything else is a very modern notion). In order for someone's son to marry the daughter of another tribe, or the converse, they had to give honor to the foreign god and dilute worship of the God of Israel.

We want to be faithful to God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. We want to speak the truth in love. We

don't want to dilute our witness to the uniqueness of the gospel message centered on Jesus Christ. But at the same time we are called to love the people in the world whom God loves: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...." (John 3:16a.) If he loves people who don't know him, we must love people who don't know him. It is often difficult to act wisely in balancing these responsibilities.

Listen to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:22: "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul remained kosher in the midst of Jews. He was Roman among Romans. In court, he demanded his citizenship. On the streets, he preached as one on the streets. When he addressed those who knew the Bible, he taught the Bible. When he stood on Mars Hill, he quoted Greek prophets. He went wherever he possibly could and adopted the familiar ways of the people around him in order to be able to speak of Christ from a loving heart willing to bridge into their world.

But hear the word of James 4:4: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." The balancing act for us that is illuminated in the issue of marriage for Nehemiah's people is to love unbelievers with the radical *agapé* love of Christ, but not to befriend them in the way James warns against. It's love without compromise, and it's difficult.

Sabbath-keeping is the second subject before us, and I think by analogy it too says some important things to us.

### **Trusting God and being different**

Keeping the Sabbath meant that they were confident that God was going to provide for them. If they let the fields lie fallow in the seventh year, they were expressing confidence that God had given them enough in the sixth to survive.

The second thing that the Sabbath did for them, and it is an important lesson for us, was that it distinguished the people of Israel from all the peoples around them. They were weird for God's sake, peculiar in the name of the Lord. We, too, must be peculiar in the name of the Lord.

Something about our behavior, our convictions, our carriage, our speech, our relationships, should mark us off from other people. We're not just like everybody else. These Jews would not do business on Saturdays. They would not open the markets. They were weird. Are we different because we're honest, perhaps? Do we refuse to pad expense accounts? Do we refuse to go along with what's untrue in the work place or elsewhere? Are we different because we have an aversion to sleaziness that other people seem to find perfectly okay? Are we different because our families have real priority for us, not just lip-service priority? Is there something about us that challenges conventions, so that people say, "Great guy, but he's just a little weird"?

The last thing the Sabbath means is that we say no to a life of maximum acquisition. My highest goal is not making the most I possibly can and preserving everything I make. If I'm going to keep the Sabbath, it means I have something I value more than that.

The third focus in this vow is that the temple should be made to flourish at the heart of Israel.

### **Putting on the new**

There's a list of things they were committed to doing: bringing wood, grain, and other supplies; supporting the Levites and the priests; sending money, and so on. And there are analogies in our setting. The first two vows, not to intermarry with the other peoples and not to do commerce on the Sabbath, were both negative. This is a glorious positive statement. I'm going to start something. I'm going to begin to pay attention. I'm going to discover my gifts and use them with other people. I'm going to worship with a full heart. I'm going to sing louder and rejoice more often and find ways to put God first in my life. In the language of the New Testament we're told to "put off your old self...and to put on the new self...." (Ephesians 4:22, 24.) This is putting on the new, finding the

good and holy and true and vital and loving things to do and starting to do them.

### **Change from the outside in**

The last observation I would make about this determination to be different, this commitment to renewal, this making of vows, this setting a course and so on, is an interesting observation made in 11:1-2:

**Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.**

A national conscription was undertaken. Jerusalem had been a bit of a ghost town when the walls were down. Nobody wanted to live there. It was a place that had sad old memories but no present or future. Israelites had settled in the wide region around and had built farms and small communities, but not enough people wanted to live in Jerusalem. So they had to draft citizens to come and live there to bring the city to life again. However, verse 2 recognizes that there were some who volunteered. There were some people who wanted to do what ought to have been done from the heart, not just because the lot fell to them. They had begun to agree with God that the changes he wanted to make were worth making. They wanted to trust him and make a life in the newly strengthened royal city.

What the making of vows accomplishes, finally, is to move obedience from the outside to the inside. I make statements of what I'll do, and eventually I find myself wanting to do what I ought to do, volunteering to do what I ought to do, choosing what's good because I long to, not only as an act of discipline. This is a subtle point; verse 2 could be passed by easily. But we can expect God to do the same with us. If we speak to him the love language of vow-making, he will, in his love, change us so that there's nothing external required for us to obey, but we're doing what we want to do in glorifying him.

Philippians 2:12 makes this statement: "...Work out your salvation with fear and trembling..." Fear and trembling is the language of covenant vows, being serious and dedicated, aware of curses and blessings, having assignments, exercising realism. "...For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." He is at work within you to make you willing and able to do what he wants. You are not on your own, disciplining yourself to be better. You are inviting God to make you better, joining him in what matters to him, growing to be a man or woman of faith. Making vows becomes a way for us to embrace God, cooperate with him, and expect him to make the changes that we have no access in ourselves to make.

### **NOTES**

1. Gary Cavelli, *Stanford Sports*, Stanford Alumni Association.
2. Robert Robinson, adapted by Margaret Clarkson, text of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.

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Steve Zeisler  
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