

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

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Scripture: Nehemiah chs. 9-10

*"Let Us Arise and Build (part 4)*

**WE WILL NOT FORSAKE THE HOUSE OF OUR GOD**

**Nehemiah 10:39.** *"For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levis shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine, and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers, and the singers. Thus, we will not forsake the house of our God."*

Satan has not liked the fact that St. Bartholomew's has been here in the Town of Tonawanda for over fifty years. He would like it if he could to remove this church. Our church has been a thorn in his side. It has been a blockade to his progress. And he would like to see this house of God forsaken.

I am sure he thought he had us on the ropes a few years ago when the Episcopal Church turned its back on the Lord and His Word. I am sure he thought he had us beat when we knew that if we were going to remain faithful to the Lord we would have to leave our church building. But all of the members and friends of St Bartholomew's, all of us who know the Lord, and all of us who love His church stood together and said, we will not forsake the house of our God, AMEN!

Now in the Old Testament the house of God was the temple. In the New Testament, the house of God is the church; not the church building, but the people. The word for Church in the NT is *ekklesia* - which literally means, *the called out ones*. We are called out of this world to follow Jesus. And then sent back into the world to be a witness for or Lord - to be the light and the salt.

In the Old Testament, God had a temple for his people, but in the New Testament, he has a people for his temple. And this people is now called in **1 Timothy 3:15**, *"the household of God."* We are the household of God.

And the responsibility God has given us, why we have embarked on this *Let Us Arise and Build* faith journey is to make sure St. Bartholomew's is not forsaken. All of us have a responsibility to bear if we claim to be members of this church.

Now when you look at Nehemiah and the people of God during their day, three things were evident in their lives. Three things that also must be evident in our own day if St. Bart's is not to be forsaken. They are summed up by three words: **EXAMINATION, CONTEMPLATION, AND DETERMINATION.** We are going to see that there was **personal examination, prayerful contemplation, and purposeful determination** in the lives of Nehemiah and the people of God, and as a result, the house of God was not forsaken.

**PERSONAL EXAMINATION**

**Nehemiah 9:1-2:** *"Now in the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sack clothes, and with dirt upon them. And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers."*

What was going on here? Personal examination. Now notice the elements of this examination. **First, there was humiliation.** They humbled themselves before God and they did it with fasting, with sackcloth, and

with dirt upon their heads. In Old Testament times when people would humble themselves in repentance before God, they would take dust and throw it up in the air and let it come down upon their heads.

We don't do that anymore, but we certainly must emulate that spirit. You see, humiliation means getting low to the earth. In fact, the root word of humiliation, *humus*, literally means "dirt." They put dirt upon their heads to show how low they were, how humiliated they were before Almighty God.

The problem with many churches in America is that they are too full of themselves. They are haughty, unbroken, and unbent but the Word says, "***a broken and a contrite spirit, thou wilt not despise, O God.***" There was brokenness, there was humiliation. We must never lose that humility before God as individuals and as a church family. We must never think that St. Bart's is the reason for our blessings. It is God, and God alone.

But not only was there humiliation, **there was separation.** Look now in verse two. "***And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners.***" What does this mean? It means that they came out from the world, got alone by themselves, and made a commitment to be separate from the world.

The Bible says in **2 Corinthians 6**, "***Come out from among them, and be separate says the Lord.***"

The truth is we don't hear much today about separation. In fact, to be holy means to be separate, to be set apart. If we are to be holy before the Lord that means we must be different than the world. The problem is in many churches all they talk about is inclusion and diversity. But those are really cover words for just be like the world. That won't make the Church strong. We are called out of the world to be different, to be separate, to be set apart so that we can go back into the world to reflect God's glory and to do His work. There was humiliation, there was separation, and there was something else.

**There was confession.** They confessed their sins to the Lord. The rest of **verse 2** reads: "***And they confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.***" They admitted their wrongdoing. You know it is easy to look around a church and point out what's wrong, but true confession begins with us. In fact, I want you to ask yourselves a question: *If every member of St. Bart's was just like me, what kind of a church would our church be?* If everybody sang as you just sang, if everybody prayed as you prayed, if everybody gave as you gave, if everybody invited people as you invited others, if everybody studied their bible as you study your bible, if everybody witnessed as you witnessed, what kind of a church would our church be? You know, sometimes we're prone to look around and ask questions like what's wrong with the church? Well, do you want to know what's wrong with the church? Go look in the mirror.

And one of the ways we make sure that St. Bart's is not forsaken is to be here every Sunday. The Bible says clearly and plainly that we are to attend the house of God. **Hebrews 10:25:** "***we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another and so much the more as you see the day approaching.***" In other words, the closer we get to the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the more we ought to be in the house of God.

Why do we come? We come to worship, we come to hear the Word of God, we come to meet with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we come in obedience to the Lord. In fact, there is a sense in which the Lord is present when His people gather that He's not present in any other way. **Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered to gather in my name, there where there gathered to gather, there am I in the midst of them."** There is no substitute for church attendance. It ought to be faithful and it ought to be regular. And the beauty of the Church, there is nobody too bad to come to church and no one too good that he need not come. We all need to be in the house of God.

## **PRAYERFUL CONTEMPLATION**

But not only was there a personal examination, **there was a prayerful contemplation.** In Neh. 9:4, there begins a long prayer. Notice in verses 4-5: *"Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God.*

*<sup>5</sup>Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed, and exalted above all blessing and praise."*

This is the preamble to the longest prayer in the bible which is right here in Nehemiah chapter nine. And the leaders and people begin to contemplate the blessings of God. They looked back at the past. That's one of the things we have been doing. We're looking back at the past 54 years reflecting on what God has done through the ministry of St. Bartholomew's. And by doing that, we're contemplating the blessings of God.

That's what Nehemiah and the people did. For example, in **verses 19-21, they spoke of the provisions of God.** In **verses, 22-23 they spoke of the promises of God.** In **verses 24-25, they spoke of the power of God.** In **verses 26-28, they spoke of the patience of God.** And in **verses 29-30, they spoke of the punishments of God.** They talked about God's blessings and their failures as they reviewed the past. They had prayerful contemplation. And so if our house of God be not forsaken, not only must there be a personal examination, there must be a prayerful contemplation. Think of the blessings of God upon our lives and this Church family. Think on how good God has been to this church. Think how many homes have been built on a sure foundation. Think how many marriages have been saved? Or those who have gone through the tragedy of divorce, how they have come through it stronger by God's grace. Think about how many of our youth have been impacted for Christ? Think about how many blessings have come to elderly people and our shut-ins, or about how many have been healed? How I thank God for it. How I praise the Lord for God's goodness on His people. How I thank God for His provisions. How I thank God for His promises. How I thank God for His power. How I thank God for His patience. Think on these things. How good God has been to us.

## **PURPOSEFUL DETERMINATION**

Yes, there was personal examination. And yes, there was a prayerful contemplation. And then finally, and this is so important, **there was a purposeful determination.** After they had prayed the prayer in which they contemplated the goodness and greatness of God, after they had examined their own lives and their own failures they made a solemn vow, a holy covenant before God.

Please look now at **Nehemiah 9:38:** *<sup>38</sup>"Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests."*

So all the people signed this covenant. That's what we are going to do in a few moments. We are going to sign a commitment to support the "Let Us Arise and Build" mission initiative. Some may say I don't believe in making a pledge or signing a commitment. I want to thank God that I've got a Book here that is full of God's pledges and commitments to us. And everyone one of them are yes, and every one are true in the Lord Jesus Christ. And Nehemiah and the people as they saw what God had done for them and as they thought about the blessings of God, they made a covenant. They signed it, they sealed it, and they said there are three things that we're going to do. And I want you to see what they are right here. In other words, what was their purposeful determination?

First of all, they made a determination concerning their faithfulness. Secondly, they made a determination concerning their families and thirdly, they made a determination concerning their finances. That's what they did so that the house of God be not forsaken.

First of all, **their faithfulness**. Look now at **Nehemiah 10:29**. They said they are <sup>29</sup>*are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes...*" In other words, they are committing to live by the Word of God. St. Bart's has been blessed because there has been a commitment to preach, teach and obey God's Word. And we will continue to be able to minister in Tonawanda and Western NY as long as this book is preached and obeyed. Brothers and sisters, will you enter into that covenant? Will you say yes, we will by the grace of God live by His Book? Will you trust and obey?

But they made a commitment not only in their faithfulness, but secondly, **in their families**. I want you to look at what else they committed to when they signed that covenant **Neh. 10:30**: *"and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons."*

Now, what did they mean by that? They meant that their family life was going to glorify God. That they were not going to lose their children to the world. They weren't going to let their children marry unsaved people. The Bible says in I Corinthians not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. What does this mean for us today? It means we're going to bring our children up in the fear, love, and knowledge of Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is St. Bart's will be forsaken if we don't bring our children up to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

One of the things that blesses me about St. Bart's is that I can see children's children's children in this church. I see generations of people who have loved the Lord and His church and they have taught their children to do the same, and those children have taught their children and they're all still members of the same church. That's one of the reasons why St. Bart's is the wonderful church that it is. And may it continue, may the transformation of the generations keep on going. But it begins in the home and until our children are 18 being active in the Church should be expected, encouraged, and celebrated.

Where else did these people make a solemn declaration? Third, **concerning their finances**. Look at **Neh. 10:31-39**: <sup>31</sup>*As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.*

<sup>32</sup>*We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute year one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:*

<sup>33</sup>*for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.*

<sup>34</sup>*Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law;*

<sup>35</sup>*and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually,*

<sup>36</sup>*and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God.*

<sup>37</sup>*We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil*

*to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.*

<sup>38</sup>*The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse.*

<sup>39</sup>*For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers Thus, we will not neglect the house of our God.*

You see, Nehemiah and the people recognized that you honor God first in your business (no work on the Sabbath) and in your wealth – tithes and offerings. They knew that it takes money to carry on God's work. Don't get so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good where you just say oh well, I, I'm just interested in spiritual things and I'm not interested in material things. The truth is the Lord Jesus Christ had more to say about a man's relationship to his material goods than he had to say about heaven or hell. Don't forget it. Jesus said, ***“where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also”***. And St. Bart's will be forsaken if we do not make a solemn commitment number one, concerning our faithfulness to obey the word of God; number two concerning our families, to bring them up in knowledge and love of Jesus Christ; and number three, concerning our finances.

And so as we come to this special time in the life of our church, I want to ask you if you'll do these three things. Number one, make a personal examination. What kind of a member are you? Don't look around at others and ask what are they doing, but look around and ask yourself, what am I doing? Number two, make a prayerful contemplation. Reflect on how good God has been. Note all that God has done in your life and in the life of this church. He has been good, He has been gracious. And number three, make a purposeful determination - concerning your faithfulness, concerning your family, and concerning your finances. so that we can all say together, ***“We will not forsake the house of our God.”*** In name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen!