

### **Restoration of Covenant Life (Nehemiah 12-13)**

After the wall surrounding Jerusalem was completed, the Israelites gathered in Jerusalem to renew their covenant with God. Ezra read the Law to the people and they heard the Law, they wept. Yet Nehemiah rebuked them for their sorrow, adding, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord” (Neh. 8:10). However central work might be to serving God, so is celebration. On holy days, people are to enjoy the fruits of their labors as well as sharing them with those who lack such delights.

The rhythm of work and rest is central to the restoration of covenant life in Nehemiah. Among the promises made by the people as they renewed their covenant with the Lord was a commitment to honor the Sabbath.

Later, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, where he discovered that some of the reforms he had initiated were thriving, while others had been neglected. For example, he observed some people working on the Sabbath. Jewish officials had been letting Gentile traders bring their goods into Jerusalem. So Nehemiah rebuked those who had failed to honor the Sabbath. In addition to harsh words, Nehemiah employed a pragmatic approach. He closed the city gates before the Sabbath began, keeping them shut until the day of rest had passed. He also stationed some of his servants at the gates so that they might tell potential sellers to leave.

The question of whether Christians ought to keep the Sabbath, and how they should do it, is a complex issue. What we can learn from the last chapters of Nehemiah is that Sabbath-keeping was central to God’s first covenant people, and their vows were threatened by economic interaction with those who did not honor the Sabbath. In today’s context, we may want to examine whether our current round-the-clock culture of commerce puts us in a similar situation. In Nehemiah’s time, a conscious — and potentially costly — decision was needed to restore covenant life with God.