

INK

BEGINNING

Have you ever gone car shopping and wanted to get a price quote in writing so you could shop at another dealership?

Illustration: When I was in car sales back in the early 90's we were taught to never put anything in writing if the prospective car buyer was going to continue to shop for a car at another dealership. It was too easy for a competitor to beat our deal by just a little and then we would lose the sale.

But as a consumer, when I am shopping for something, and I'm getting a quote on something, I like the sales person to *put it in writing*. I want the terms and conditions and cost and any hidden fees in print so I know what to expect and also to prevent me from being taken advantage of in the sale process. *It's a trust thing.*

You want to talk about trust builders, how about prenuptial agreements – those are real trust builders aren't they? Before Britney Spears married ex Kevin Federline, she had her lawyers draw up a prenuptial agreement that reportedly awards him only \$300,000 of her estimated \$100 million in assets. Paul McCartney didn't take that precaution and faced a mega-million-dollar payout to his second wife, Heather Mills McCartney.

Here's the Point:

Written agreements give both parties a way of measuring how well they are keeping up their end of the deal.

Transition: *If you've ever bought a cell phone, a car, a timeshare, or a house, you've had to sign contracts; and you probably got writer's cramp filling out all of the paperwork in these contracts! But contracts are designed to explain the responsibilities of each party.*

There are contracts for everything. There are contracts that govern purchases, legal actions, property ownership, and even relationships like we've already mentioned.

In Nehemiah's day, the Jews were under a contract that governed their relationship with God. This agreement that they had with God was called the Mosaic Covenant. In fact, the word *covenant* means *testament* or *agreement*.

Christians today are also under a contract. It's also called a *covenant* or an *agreement*, it's the *New Testament*. With the final sacrifice being made by Jesus Christ to pay for the sins of the world, Jesus explained that the basis for this New Testament, covenant, or agreement, was His own blood (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) Since the long awaited Messiah had come and sacrificed Himself, any who have believed in Him are part of the New Testament agreement. Christians' relationships are now governed by the terms recorded in the New Testament. And while Christians may not have signed an official document when we entered into this agreement, our trust in Christ as Savior which causes us to become born again places us in this contract.

We know God will keep up His end of the contract, but what can we do to ensure we are keeping up our end of the agreement?

So here's our Question We Need to Answer:

How can Christians evaluate how well they are keeping their part of their agreement with God?

Transition: *Well the Jews with Nehemiah in Jerusalem put some things in writing. And we can definitely learn from their example. Turn to Nehemiah chapter 9. Nehemiah 9:32-38.*

Story Background

Nehemiah chapter 9 records the continuing revival of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Jews continued to take the necessary steps to restore their closeness to God. They fasted, humbled themselves before God, separated themselves from the practices of unbelievers, confessed their sins, read God's Word, and worshipped the LORD.

Then the spiritual leadership stood up in front of the gathering of believers and did a couple of things. They reviewed the great ways God had delivered them from their tribulations and oppressions over past centuries. They also reviewed Israel's ungrateful, rebellious response to God's care for them. Then they decided to recommit their faith and loyalty to God. And this is where we'll pick up our study today.

Text: Nehemiah 9:32-38

9:32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible [*awesome*] God, who keepest [*guards or protects*] covenant [*agreement*] and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

God, please don't see the trouble we have experienced since Assyria first captured the Northern tribes and the oppression we are currently experiencing as something minor.

9:33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:

Nevertheless, You are justified in letting all of these terrible things happen to us because You have done right by us but we have done wickedly. *What a huge and honest admission.*

9:34-35 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. **35** For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

None of the Jews were honoring the covenant agreement made at the time of Moses. No one was; not the political leaders, not even the spiritual leaders were honoring the agreement that governed the relationship the believers had with God. Despite God's blessings, provisions, and protection, the Jews acted sinfully.

9:36-37 Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it: **37** And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

The Promised Land that God gave to the Jews which was so rich and plenteous, was now dominated and controlled by non-believing nations. And not only the land but the people themselves were subservient to non-believing world powers.

9:38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it [*sign it*].

With a crisp reminder of the history of their many breaches of contract, the generation of Jews with Nehemiah decided to make a change. Both political and spiritual leaders freshly commit to honoring the agreement, the covenant that governed their relationship they had with God.

Passage Recap Questions

1. In verse 9:32, why do the Jews have a right to ask God for mercy and help? Because they'd begun to act again by faith and obey the teachings in God's Word. Early in the chapter their faith-filled obedience can be seen. They fasted, humbled themselves before God, separated themselves from the practices of unbelievers, confessed their sins, read God's Word, and worshipped the LORD.

2. What does verse 9:33 reveal about the attitude of the Jews at this time? It reveals a submissive attitude before God. They essentially said, "God, You were right, we were wrong. We've deserved every bad thing You've allowed to happen to us."

3. From verse 9:38, what caused the Jews to want to recommit to the covenant agreement they had with God? After reviewing God's blessings and their ungrateful, sinful ways, they owned up to their sin and recommitted to the covenant they had with God. By taking time to review their "breaches of contract", and being humble enough to admit their participation in their sinful history, the logical response was to seek a right relationship with God. They did this by recommitting their allegiance to the Mosaic Covenant and they ***put it in ink.***

Summary of the Bible Passage

The Jewish spiritual leaders reviewed God's mercy and grace, admitted their own sinful failures in the past, and renewed their commitment to God in writing.

Too many Christians today, myself included, don't slow down long enough to review how well we are performing our part of the contract we have with God. Our obligation to our agreement with God does not stop at our acceptance of His Son for salvation.

Christians have the responsibility to daily live up to the "terms of the contract" in the New Testament. Just like the Jews with Nehemiah committed to God in writing, believers today can put their commitment to Christ in writing.

***Transition:** So are Christians supposed to write up some sort of contract and sign it to show their commitment? Well, you could. But we can "put our commitment in ink" occasionally and reap the benefit of being attentive to our relationship with Christ.*

APPLYING

Here's the Main Idea for the Lesson

Christians can write to God in a prayer journal to evaluate our relationship with Him and restate our commitment to Christ.

Group Discussion

Question Do you think occasionally writing in a prayer journal could be more effective than just praying in your thoughts? Why or why not? Some Christians find that using a prayer journal helps them to better gather their thoughts and slows them down a little to more thoughtfully consider where their relationship with God really is at.

Question Do any of you use a prayer journal? What benefit have you found in writing your thoughts to God? Would you recommend it to another believer?

Question Why do you think more Christians don't use a prayer journal from time to time? *Maybe their too busy.* What should being too busy to use a prayer journal tell a believer? That they are too busy, period.

WHAT do Christians need to do?

Christians need to occasionally evaluate their closeness to God and state their commitment to Christ in writing.

WHY do we need to put our commitment to God in writing?

Writing to God slows us down enough to help us clearly think about our behavior and to accurately evaluate how well we are maintaining our half of our relationship with Him.

HOW can believers express their commitment to God in writing?

1. Get a notebook you can use as a prayer journal and pick a time and a place where you won't be disturbed.
2. **At least one time this week**, tell God in writing how much you appreciate His blessings in your life.
3. Write down the areas where you've recently failed to live up to how the Bible teaches us to live.
4. In a written request, ask Him to help you overcome ungodly ways of living life and recommit your loyalty to Him.
5. **Within a month**, revisit your journal to measure your progress and maintain your commitment and growth in Christ.

INSPIRING

Jerusalem in 444 B.C. was a picture of revival and spiritual restoration. Can you imagine what our church would look like if the majority of us would stop being complacent, stop being too busy, stop thinking we've already arrived, and go to Wal-Mart and get a notebook to use for a prayer journal this week – and then actually journal to God?! If you're not trying to get closer to God, it's either you, the world, or the devil that's stopping that closeness. God definitely wants to be close to us. Let Him get close – try writing to Him and watch Him transform all of us.

Remember:

Christians can write to God in a prayer journal to evaluate our relationship with Him and restate our commitment to Christ.
