

THE LAW TAUGHT

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 8:2-12

CONTEXT

After completing the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah established measures around the city to protect them from their opponents (Neh. 7:1-4). He then reiterated the initial census of returnees recorded in Ezra 2 (Neh. 7:5-73a) with the intention of repopulating Jerusalem (7:4-5) and renewing their covenant with God (8:1). To do this, Ezra read the Torah—the first five books of the Bible written by Moses—to the people. The Torah contained the Israelites' history, God's covenant with them, the covenant stipulations, and God's promised blessings and curses.

KEY CONCEPT

Scripture should lead us to worship, repent, and celebrate.

As you examine Nehemiah 8:2-12:

- Note the connection that reading God's Word leads us to worship Him.
- Recognize that rightly understanding God's Word causes us to both mourn our sin and rejoice in our salvation found in Christ.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews Returns and Rebuilds the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

SESSION STUDY:
Ezra Reads the Book of the Law in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Esther and Mordecai Rescue God's People from Destruction (Esther 1-10)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)

The People Confess Their Sin, Vow Faithfulness, and Dedicate the Wall (Nehemiah 9-12)

Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Nehemiah 7:1-4
- Day 2:** Nehemiah 7:5-73a
- Day 3:** Nehemiah 7:73b-8:3

- Day 4:** Nehemiah 8:4-12
- Day 5:** Nehemiah 8:13-18
- Day 6:** Psalm 119



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

GOD'S WORD SHOULD LEAD US TOWARD WORSHIP

(NEHEMIAH 8:2-6).

Circle the actions in this passage, especially those performed by Ezra and the Israelites in response.

2 On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. **3** While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. **4** The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah stood beside him on his right; to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. **5** Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. **6** Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Ezra's role as scribe and priest was to know the law intimately and guide the people in keeping it. Therefore, he led this public reading, surrounded by other teachers of the law, the Levites. Although we don't know with certainty, it seems that public readings had been neglected since the first group of Jews returned from exile. Each person didn't have a copy of the Scriptures as we do now, so they depended on public readings to know and remember God's commands. Before this reading of God's Word, some of the people may have been familiar with parts of it, but it was necessary to read the entire law to turn their hearts toward God collectively.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

THE SCRIPTURES: The Holy Bible reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

One of Ezra's main tasks in returning to Jerusalem was to reinstate proper worship of God and observance of the law. When Ezra read the law, the people worshiped and bowed down. Notice their initial reaction was to praise God for His Word, and then they wept over their sin. It's right to grieve our sin, but to do so without first recognizing God's character overlooks the grace that He gives. God's law speaks to us and about us, but we aren't the main characters. It's about God and His purposes.

Notes

LEADER NOTE: Priests in Israel were descendants of Aaron, ordained by God to act as representatives in His presence on behalf of the people and to teach the law (Lev. 8–10). Through several prophets, God rebuked the shepherds (priests) of Israel for failing to instruct or misleading the flock, which ultimately led to their exile (Jer. 23:1–4; 50:6; Ezek. 34). Ezra devoted himself to teaching God's laws (Ezra 7:10), and he took his role seriously by leading the people in the hearing of God's Word and worship.

What is your reaction when you're convicted by God's Word?

LEADER NOTE: Licentiousness is an overemphasis of God's grace and underemphasis of His law. Legalism is just the opposite. Balancing grace and truth in our lives can be tricky, especially depending on our various backgrounds and worldviews. God holds His children to the standard of His Word, but the very fact that He has given us His Word is a gracious gift! We should be convicted of our sins by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, but we should also give Him thanks for loving us enough to use conviction to bring us to Him. If our conviction stops at guilt and shame, we haven't grasped the full gospel.

Kneeling, bowing, or falling to the ground is a common picture throughout Scripture. In the ancient Near East, this was a physical expression of recognizing the authority or divinity of another. In Scripture, those who bow down before anyone other than the true God are often rebuked (Matt. 4:9–10; Acts 10:25–26; Rev. 22:8–9). Kneeling facedown represented humility before the Lord, submitting to His Word and sovereignty. The Israelites recognized God's greatness through His law, and after blessing Him by standing, lifting their hands, and shouting "Amen," they lowered themselves in adoration.

How might you respond to God's Word with your entire self—physically and emotionally—like the Israelites?

AS WE UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURE, WE WILL BE LED TO REPENTANCE AND CELEBRATION (NEHEMIAH 8:7-12).

Underline the commands to the Israelites in this passage.

7 Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. **8** They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. **9** Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. **10** Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our LORD. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.” **11** And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, since today is holy. Don’t grieve.” **12** Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.

The Israelites worshiped upon hearing God’s Word. When they realized how they and their ancestors had broken God’s law, however, they mourned, recognizing they had acted corruptly toward their holy God. Just like the Israelites, we can’t properly grieve our sin if we don’t first grasp the character of the God against whom we sin.

What does your attitude toward your own sin reveal about your understanding of who God is?

Once the Levites explained the law, the people were encouraged. “Don’t grieve,” they were told, because “this day is holy.” According to the law, that day, the first day of the seventh month (v. 2), was a day of rest and commemoration as the people prepared for the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Shelters (Lev. 23:24-25,27,34).

They also were told not to grieve because “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). Although solemn repentance was a healthy reaction, the purpose of this gathering was to renew the people’s covenant with God, which was a joyous thing. Not only had God recently restored them, but reading the book of the Law reminded them that the Lord had saved their people in the past as well. God’s joy in His people was their source of strength and protection.

GOSPEL CONNECTION

The reading of Scripture is important, individually and corporately. Through the study of Scripture, we discover together who God is—His holiness, goodness, grace, and mercy. Scripture points to Christ and His wondrous works of salvation. Hearing and studying it together leads to the growth of God's kingdom.

The commands in this passage (rejoice, eat, drink, send, and be still) revolve around delighting in God's gifts, sharing those gifts with others, and resting in the mercy He gives. Life with God is not one of restriction and blind obedience but one of abundance within His loving boundaries.

LEADER NOTE: God's boundaries for humankind are not a consequence of the first sin. They existed even before the fall in Genesis 3 (see Gen. 2:15-17). His boundaries have always been for our flourishing. A legalistic view of life sees enjoying things as dangerous and to be avoided, but this perspective fails to take the whole Word of God into account. He tells us throughout Scripture to live fully (John 10:10), enjoying the good things He has given us (Deut. 14:26-29; Eccl. 2:24-26). But we must keep them in their proper place as created things, not worshiping them as only the Creator deserves.

What do the Levites' commands teach you about God's heart for His people?

We should mourn our sins, not from a place of unhealthy fear or self-hatred but from a place of reverence for God. This mourning should be followed by joy because God doesn't leave us dead in our sins. His heart is to see us return to Him, and He graciously provides the mercy and forgiveness necessary to make that happen.

LEADER NOTE: Since Christ's death and resurrection, our turning to God is possible through faith in Him and obedience to His teachings. Those who lived before Christ lived under the old covenant, and this return to God was possible by trusting His promises through obedience (Deut. 30:1-10). This may sound like works-based righteousness, but even in the Old Testament, obedience was a result of faith in God and His Word and receiving His grace.

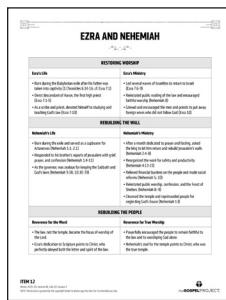
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ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, ask: “What is your favorite book? What makes this book special?” Take note of any repeated books as well as any common themes among the books discussed.

TRANSITION: There are many good books out there, but none compare to God’s Word. Today we will discover the impact of an important book—the book of the Law, one part of Scripture. We will see how it drew God’s people to repentance, worship, and joy.

CONTEXT



SUMMARIZE: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. (Pass out copies of the handout **Pack Item 12: Ezra and Nehemiah** and use it to highlight the main headings for the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah.) These two books of the Bible tell about the challenges the people faced as they sought to return home and rebuild the temple, the walls of Jerusalem, the city itself, and their lives.

SAY: Last week we focused on Nehemiah as he confessed his and the people’s sins and asked God to restore the nation because of His covenant and His character. We saw God answer Nehemiah’s prayer by blessing their rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, revealing His glory and sovereignty not only to God’s people but also to the surrounding peoples.

RECAP

REVIEW: Direct the group to share the most impactful part for them from this week’s personal preparation. Also invite the group to ask questions related to the study, and provide answers as you are able. (It’s okay to say, “I don’t know. Let’s both do some research this week to see if we can find the answer.”)

TRANSITION: Drawing on our personal preparation with the Scripture this week, today we will discuss the role of Scripture in an individual’s relationship with God.



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Key Concept: Scripture should lead us to worship, repent, and celebrate.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Call attention to page 102 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), where adults will see a chart titled “Encountering the Book.” Recreate this chart on a board or large sheet of paper in your room. You will record the results of the group activity as adults dig into the Scripture text.

Encountering the Book

Read Nehemiah 8:2-12. Write in the columns below how the different groups interacted with the book of the Law and the result.

	INTERACTION	RESULT
Ezra and the Levites		
Returning Exiles		
Believers Today		

INSTRUCT: Form pairs or small teams and direct each team to read Nehemiah 8:2-12. Instruct them to complete the first two rows of the chart in their PSG by writing how the different groups interacted with the book of the Law and what resulted from that interaction. Encourage teams to use the personal preparation in their PSG to help them with their work.

REPORT: When teams have finished their work, instruct them to report their findings one team at a time. As each team shares, write down their responses on the table on the board.

ASK: Leaving room for responses after each question, ask: “Why do you think the Israelites were told not to mourn or weep (vv. 9,11)? What do you think verse 10 means when it says, ‘The joy of the LORD is your strength’? How do you think the people felt hearing the book of the Law after being in exile for so

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long?" Point out that some of the people returning had been in exile for a large portion of their adult lives or had even been born in exile. Allow the group to share their thoughts and insights.

INSTRUCT: Guide the teams to talk about the last row—ways that believers can interact with Scripture today. Direct teams to fill out the row in their PSG, listing how believers encounter the Bible today and the possible results of those encounters. After several minutes, call on the teams to share what they wrote.

DEBRIEF

How does your present situation affect your perspective of God's Word?

Why do you think most people today do not respond to Scripture the same way the returnees did?

SUMMARIZE

In Nehemiah 8, we saw how the reading of the book of the Law led the Jews in Jerusalem to mourn their faithlessness toward God and to fall on their knees in worship before God's holiness. We saw Ezra encourage the people to celebrate and rejoice in what God had done. That joy and perspective of God's sovereignty and provision in their lives would give them strength for the days ahead.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 103). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: The public reading of God's Word likely had been neglected for many years among the Israelites. They were a people who had a longstanding relationship with God, but this didn't mean they automatically knew His Word. Today, we often fall into the trap of cultural or "inherited" Christianity, believing that because we grew up going to church or live generally good lives, we have a saving relationship with the Lord. Unfortunately, this often leads to neglect of reading God's Word, which then leads to low biblical understanding or acceptance of non-biblical teachings as "Christian."

Why is it necessary to know God's Word to truly obey and worship Him?



HEART: When the Israelites were refreshed with God's Word, they praised God. The law reminded them of their ancestors' salvation from slavery, their covenant with God, His guidance and provision, and His compassion for them despite their rebellion. They recognized their own salvation from exile and recognized the Lord's faithfulness despite their unfaithfulness. They properly mourned their sin, but by God's grace, joy and gladness had the final say.

How has Nehemiah 8 convicted your heart regarding your attitude toward God's Word?

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 **HANDS:** In Nehemiah 8:13-18, the people celebrated the Festival of Shelters in accordance with the law (Deut. 16:16). The renewal of their covenant with God led them to joyfully celebrate and obey like they had not done since “the days of Joshua son of Nun” (Neh. 8:17)! While the power for change ultimately rests with the Holy Spirit, we, like the Jews, must take part in our covenant with God by reading and delighting in His commands.

What is one thing you can do this week to remind yourself of God's commands in a way that results in worship and celebration?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Evaluate your commitment to God's Word. How does interacting with Scripture lead to repentance and worship in your life?
- Read Hebrews 4:12 and reflect on how it relates to Nehemiah 8:2-12.
- Take time to consider the ways God has demonstrated His love and mercy toward you. Pause and celebrate before the Lord by giving Him thanks.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 103 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through a section of Psalm 119 with your group (consider vv. 33-40 or 41-48). Thank God for the ability to handle, read, hear, and savor His precepts.