

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 (Nehemiah 7:1-4). He then reiterated the initial census of returnees recorded in Ezra 2 (Nehemiah 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.

PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 8:2-6

GOD'S WORD SHOULD LEAD US TOWARD WORSHIP.

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.

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.



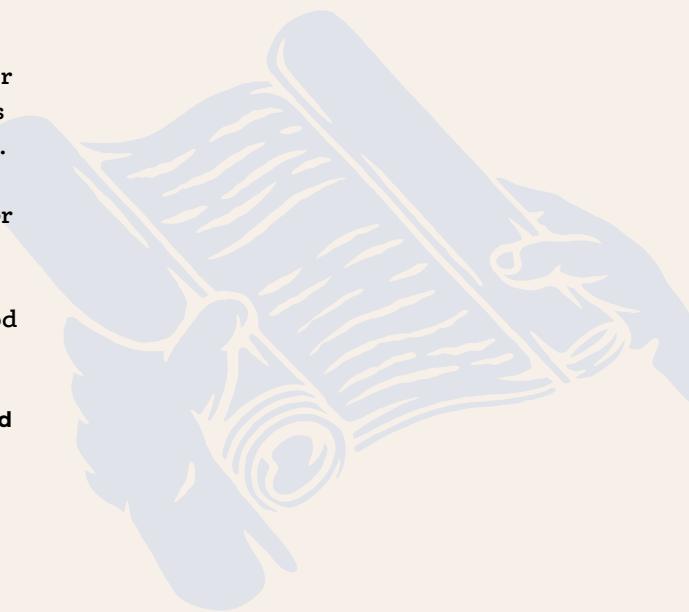
Ezra's role as scribe and priest was to know the law intimately and guide the people in keeping it. Therefore, he led this public reading, surrounded by other teachers of the law, the Levites. Although we don't know with certainty, it seems that public readings had been neglected since the first group 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.

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.

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

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 (Matthew 4:9-10; Acts 10:25-26; Revelation 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?



PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 8:7-12

AS WE UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURE, WE WILL BE LED TO REPENTANCE AND CELEBRATION.

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.

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 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 (Leviticus 23:24-25,27,34).

They also were told not to grieve because "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 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.

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.

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.

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		

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?



HEAD

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



HEART

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



HANDS

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?

PRAYING SCRIPTURE



Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, contains 176 verses, but it is entirely focused on the beauty of God's law and the abundant life that it brings. Choose one section of the psalm to read, meditate on, and pray, asking the Lord to soften your heart to love and follow His Word.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

