

Ezra Reads the Law



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 2

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Nehemiah 8:1–18.

MEMORY VERSE: “They read the *Book of the Law of God*. They made it easy to understand, and explained what it meant. They did this so that the people could understand what was being read” (Nehemiah 8:8, ERV).

THE JEWS FINISH building the city wall. Nehemiah is their leader. He helps the builders put the gates into the wall. Then the work is done. When the Jews finish the wall, the people from the lands around Jerusalem are surprised. These people are Israel's enemies. Then Nehemiah says, the enemies understand that “our God had helped us finish the work” (Nehemiah 6:16, NIV). The enemies also understand that God is real. The enemies hate the Jews. They do everything they can to stop Israel from building. But the Jews finish the work God gives them to do anyway.

After the Jews finish the wall, Nehemiah makes his brother Hanani the governor of Jerusalem. Nehemiah also makes Hananiah the leader of the city's watchtower. Nehemiah chooses these two men because they trust and honor God (Nehemiah 7:2). The Jews finish the wall during the month of Elul (the 6th month; read Nehemiah 6:15).

So, what should the Jews do now? Nehemiah 8–10 shows us the things that happen next. These chapters show us that the Jews want to obey God's law with all their hearts. God's law fills the hearts of His people with joy. These wonderful things happen during the month of Tishri (Nehemiah 8:2). Tishri is the 7th month. As we shall see, it is an important time in Israel's history.



Nehemiah helps the builders put the gates in the wall.

GOD'S PEOPLE MEET TOGETHER (Nehemiah 8:1, 2)

Read Nehemiah 8:1, 2. These verses tell us why God's law is important to His people. Why is it important?

The Jews finish building Jerusalem's wall. They move into the city. Then they all meet in the open in Jerusalem's square, or public area. This meeting happens in the 7th month, the month of Tishri. Tishri is one of the most important months of the year for Israelites. During this month, the Jews celebrate the Feast of Trumpets on the 1st day of the month. The Feast of Trumpets is a holy day that helps the Jews get ready for God's judgment. On the 10th day of Tishri, the Jews keep the Day of Judgment. Then on the 15th day of Tishri, the Jews keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This holy day helps the Jews remember everything God did for them in Egypt. He freed them from slavery. Then He took care of them in the desert for 40 years.

After the Jews finish the wall, they meet on the 1st day of the month. On this day, the Jews also celebrate the Feast of Trumpets. The leaders invite everyone to meet in the public square in Jerusalem. All the men and the women in the land come for this special meeting. The Jewish leaders wish to read the law to the people. The leaders want the people to have a chance to learn about God and their own history.



The people want Ezra to read God's words to them.

The people invite Ezra to read to them from Moses' law. Then the people build a special platform, or raised floor. They ask Ezra to stand on the platform where everyone can see him. Then they ask Ezra to read. The leaders do not force the people to come to the meeting. The people ask Ezra to bring the book of Moses' law. They want Ezra to read God's words to them. What parts does Ezra read? We think Ezra reads from the five books of Moses. These books include the law that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

Read Deuteronomy 31:9–13. What does the Lord tell His people in these verses? What lessons can we learn for ourselves from God's Word?

In Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Moses tells the Israelites to meet together and read God's law. He tells them to read the law during the Feast of Tabernacles. Moses says Israel's holy leaders should read God's law to all the men, women, children, and the strangers in the land.

READ AND OBEY THE LAW! (Nehemiah 8:3)

Ezra brings the law to read to the people. Yesterday, we wondered which parts of the law Ezra reads. Does Ezra read only the Ten Commandments again and again for half a day? To help us answer this question, we must understand what “the law” means. The law includes the five books Moses wrote: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books are named the Torah. The Torah includes the Ten Commandments. But the Torah is much more than that. It includes the history of God’s people. It shows God’s leading. The law helps show the people who they are and where they come from. The word “law” also includes all God’s commands to His people. God’s commands help us to know the spiritual road we should walk on. When Ezra reads, the people learn about their history. This history includes the seven days that God made heaven and earth and the stories about Joshua. Ezra reads to the people the stories, songs, poems, blessings, and rules in Book of the Law. Ezra reads about the trouble that God’s people have when they disobey God. As Ezra reads, the Jews remember that God is always there for His people.

Read Nehemiah 8:3; Deuteronomy 4:1; Deuteronomy 6:3, 4; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 1:2; Proverbs 19:20; Ezekiel 37:4; and Matthew 17:5. What do these verses teach us about studying the Bible? What should we do to understand it better?

The people want to know more about God’s law. Why do the people feel this way? Remember, Ezra has read the law to the people since he arrived in Jerusalem 13 years ago. Ezra teaches them because he wants to serve God fully. He also wants to make the people’s lives better. As Ezra reads the law year after year, something wonderful happens. God’s words become real to the people. That is why the people ask Ezra to read to them when they finish the wall. They are interested in knowing more about God. So, they come gladly to the big meeting to hear Ezra read. Their hearts are full of respect for God. They have a deep wish to learn more about Him. In the same way, we should fill our minds with the Bible. Then we will want God to fill our lives fully.



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HOW TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE LAW (Nehemiah 8:4–8)

Read Nehemiah 8:4–8. As we see in these verses, who helps Ezra read the law to the people?

Two groups of 13 men help Ezra during the public reading. The 1st group of 13 men (Nehemiah 8:4) helps Ezra to read the law. The 2nd group of 13 men (Nehemiah 8:7) helps the people understand the verses better. We do not have any information about how this plan worked exactly in the public square. It is possible that the men who helped Ezra read also held the Torah. As we saw, the Torah is the name for the five books Moses wrote. The Torah was written on scrolls. Scrolls are rolled up pieces of writing paper. Hebrew scrolls are heavy. They need to be opened, or unrolled. So, maybe the 2nd group of 13 men holds the scrolls and helps open them. These 13 men also may take turns reading the scrolls. Remember, the men read to the people from morning to noon. So, they need to find a way to reach everyone in the square.

What else do these men do to help Ezra read the law? “They read so the people could [can] understand. And they explained what it meant” (Nehemiah 8:8, ICB). What does this verse mean exactly? Maybe the men are explaining the meaning of the law. Or, maybe they are saying the words in a language the people can understand. Ezra reads to them in the Hebrew language. But many of the Jews may not understand Hebrew. Remember, the people lived in Babylon for many years. The Babylonians spoke Aramaic. So, maybe the Jews forgot their own language. At the same time, Nehemiah 8:8 may mean that 13 men also help explain the verses. As these verses show, sometimes it is helpful when people explain the Bible to us. Their explanations can help us understand God’s words better.



As Protestants, we believe that each person must know the Bible for himself or herself.

Read Acts 8:26–38. What happens in these verses that is the same as what happens in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 8:4–8? What lessons can we learn from comparing these two stories?

As Protestants, we believe that each person must know the Bible for himself or herself. We must not blindly accept what anyone says about Bible truth. We must see for ourselves if what they say is true. At the same time, we can be blessed by the teachings of other people too.

THE PEOPLE SAY “AMEN” (Nehemiah 8:9–12)

What happens when Ezra opens the Torah, the Hebrew Bible? The people stand up. Before Ezra reads, he blesses God. After he reads, all the people say, “ ‘Amen, Amen’ ” (Nehemiah 8:6, NKJV). They lift their hands up to heaven. Then they bow their heads and worship God. They press their faces to the ground.

Read what happens next in Nehemiah 8:9–12. Why do the leaders tell the people not to cry or be sad?

“When the Jews come back home from Babylon, Ezra reads them the law. The people cry because of their sins. Then Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites [the holy men who helped Ezra teach the law] say kind words to the people. ‘Don’t [do not] be sad and cry. . . . Go and enjoy the good food and sweet drinks. Give some food and drinks to those [people] who didn’t [did not] prepare [cook] any food. Today is a special day to our Lord. Don’t [do not] be sad, because the joy of the LORD will make you strong.’ Nehemiah 8:9, 10 [ERV].”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, page 281, adapted.

As we see, the law helps the people to see that they are sinners. Then they start to cry. The same thing happens when God shows Himself to us. We start to understand that God is full of love and mercy. He is good and true. We see how weak we are. We see our mistakes. We understand we cannot save ourselves. The Bible helps us to see that God is holy. When we see that God is holy, we see that our sins are awful. That is why the people in Jerusalem start to cry. But God does not want them to be sad. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell the people, “ ‘Don’t [do not] be sad, because the joy of the LORD will make you strong’ ” (Nehemiah 8:10, ERV). Yes, the people failed in the past. But they can trust in God’s power to save them and make them new.

Remember, Ezra reads to the people on the Feast of Trumpets. It is a holy day. On this day, trumpets will be played. The trumpets help the people remember to get ready for the Day when God will judge His people. That will happen ten days later. So, the people need to get their hearts ready now. That is why they cry. But the leaders tell them that God hears their cries. So, they can stop. God forgives their sins. Now it is time to be happy.



“The people cry because of their sins.”

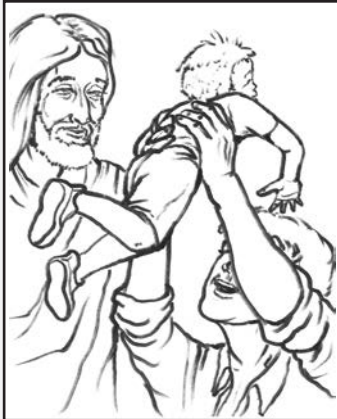
THE JOY OF THE LORD (Nehemiah 8:13–18)

“ ‘The joy of the LORD will make you strong’ ” (Nehemiah 8:10, ERV). These words help us remember that God wants us to be happy. That is part of His plan for our lives. The joy we feel comes from our knowing God and His love. We should be happy because of everything God gives us. We should be glad because He is good. These thoughts should give us joy every day. When we find joy in God, then our joy will make us strong. Then we can meet whatever troubles come our way.

Read Nehemiah 8:13–18. What happens in these verses? What do they tell us about the people and the leaders at this time?

The next day the leaders of the people come to Ezra. They want to learn more about the Bible. The leaders show that they want to lead their community to God. The leaders understand that they must put God first in their lives. Then they will have success when they lead the people. That is why the leaders want Ezra to teach them more about God.

Read Leviticus 23:39–43. What does God tell the Israelites to do? Why does God give them this command?



“ ‘The joy of the LORD will make you strong’ ” (Nehemiah 8:10, ERV). These words help us remember that God wants us to be happy.

Do you see that Nehemiah 8:14, 15, ERV, says that the people do what is written “in the law”? They obey the teachings that God gave Moses to give to Israel. So, we see from these verses how much the people want to obey God. After being prisoners in Babylon for 70 years, God’s people finally learn their lesson about obedience.

In the verses in Leviticus, God tells the people to celebrate the feast with joy. God commands them, “ ‘You must be filled with joy in front of the LORD your God for seven days’ ” (Leviticus 23:40, NIV). God wants the people to remember His mercy and forgiveness. Then they will be joyful about everything the Lord does for them.

Why is it important to be joyful in the Lord during difficult times?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “Instructed in the Law of God,” pages 661–668, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Now the people must show faith in God’s promises. God accepts their sorrow for sin. Now, God wants His people to be joyful because He forgives them. God gives them His favor again. . . .

“Something happens every time a sinner turns back to the Lord. The sinner’s life is filled with joy. The sinner opens his heart to the Holy Spirit’s power. Then the sinner sees his own guilt. He sees how unclean his own heart is next to the heart of God. God searches the hearts of humans. He is holy. Next to a holy God, the sorrowful human sees himself as he really is. He is a sinner who is guilty of breaking the law. His punishment is death. But the sinner must not be sad and give up. God pardons him. So, the sinner feels joyful because God forgives his sins. The sinner finds joy in the love of his Father in heaven. It gives God glory to take back sinners who turn away from sin. God takes them into His arms of love. He heals their deep cuts from sin. He makes them clean. He covers them in His love the same as clothes.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 668, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 “The joy of the LORD will make you strong’” (Nehemiah 8:10, ERV). Is there something we need to do to have this experience of joy in our lives? If yes, what do we need to do?
- 2 We must be sorry for our sins. At the same time, we must be joyful in the Lord. How is it possible to do these things when they are so different from each other? How do God’s law and the Good News help us do that? For the answer, read Romans 3:19–24.
- 3 Read Nehemiah 8:10, ERV: “ ‘Go and enjoy the good food and sweet drinks. Give some food and drinks to those [people] who didn’t [did not] prepare [cook] any food. Today is a special day to our Lord. Don’t [do not] be sad, because the joy of the LORD will make you strong.’ ” What does this verse teach us about the different ways we can be joyful in the Lord?



God takes back sinners who turn from sin. He “takes them in His arms of love.”