

**Conversations on
Nehemiah 8:1–3,
5–6, 8–10**

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Listen together to “Beautiful Things” by Gungor. Discuss: Where do you hear themes of transformation and renewal in this song?

WHAT is important to know?

The covenant renewal of all the people calls them to unity and invites them to renew life in their God. Rather than seeing divine instruction as cramping, restricting legislation, the Jews, then and now, recognize Torah as a compassionate guide, a pathway, a set of wise instructions about how to live together in justice and joy. But that guide and that path have not been sealed forever in concrete at Sinai. Instead, they must be reinterpreted to show the path to community and to joy, as the people worship the God who renews their life. In the season of Epiphany, Ezra reminds us that we too are recipients of divine instruction. (*Kathleen M. O'Connor*)

- ✧ How might it have felt to hear God’s Word publicly proclaimed after hearing it only secretly for so many years?
- ✧ How does reading the law of Moses to the people help them renew the covenant?
- ✧ What does the sequence of actions in these verses suggest about the relationship between the people and God?

WHERE is God in these words?

Christians, then, while denying the law or any system of works as a way to salvation, can embrace the law for the purposes it serves: restraining evil, convicting of sin, and aiding our understanding of God’s will. Because we know the law as gift from God, we understand that the entire law can be summarized positively as loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Christ becomes for us not the rejection or abrogation of the law but its telos, or fulfillment. (*Rick Nutt*)

- ✧ How does the law restrain evil, convict sin, and aid in the understanding of God’s will for Ezra and the people?
- ✧ How is the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ?
- ✧ Why must Christians deny “the law or any system of works as a way to salvation”?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

When we gather together as God’s people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God’s Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God’s world. When all of that happens, we have reason to follow the example of the people on this special day in Nehemiah 8 who ate and drank together and made “great rejoicing” (v. 12). (*W. Carter Lester*)

- ✧ How have you been changed by coming into God’s presence, centering worship on God’s Word, and offering yourself to God?
- ✧ How does your congregation “give glory to God” and give space for “God [to] make a difference” in your lives?

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

The book of Nehemiah narrates Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its wall. As King Artaxerxes’ cupbearer, Nehemiah receives news that the city is ruined. So the king releases him to help restore his homeland. Now it is time for the people to experience the word of God read and explained. Imagine. These ancient peoples have been so long away from their homeland. They may have heard the Law of Moses read in the shadow of Babylonian temples or even in synagogues. But here, in its native place, the Law looms large. And it needs an interpretative voice. (*Valerie Bridgeman Davis*)

- ✧ How does God’s Word lead you to making a difference in God’s world?
- ✧ What can you and your congregation do for restoration, reconciliation, and healing in your community?

God of all things, thank you for your holy Word. May our lives reflect your love for us as we seek to spread your love in the world. Amen.