

**Neh. 8:1–3, 5–6,
8–10**

Ps. 19

1 Cor. 12:12–31a

Luke 4:14–21

God's Will and Ways

**Goal for
the Session**

Children will give thanks for God's law and those who teach it to them.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Kathleen M. O'Connor

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.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," Rick Nutt

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.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," W. Carter Lester

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).

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

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Valerie Bridgeman Davis

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.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

***Nehemiah 8:1–3,
5–6, 8–10***

Focus on Your Teaching

Rules and teachers are present in every child's life, whether in first grade or middle school. At a young age, they learn to differentiate the rules for school from the rules at home. They quickly discover which teachers have real authority and whose bark is worse than the bite. And during these years, they are all about fairness. If they have been in church school, they may be aware of the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule. In this session, they will hear how some people of God paid new attention to God's law.

Holy God, guide my planning and my teaching so that these children will be thankful for your law and eager to live according to it. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- green cloth
- white battery-powered candle
- offering plate
- Bible, bookmark
- Resource Sheet 1
- newsprint, markers
- 1" x 8½" green paper strip, paper chain started Dec. 2
- tape
- Color Pack 29
- Singing the Feast*, 2018–2019; CD player

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, colored copier paper, pencils, scissors, tape
- option 2: Color Pack 18, 32; small sticky notes; pens; *Singing the Feast*, 2018–2019; CD player
- option 3: card stock, fine-tipped colored markers, hole punch, ribbon, scissors
- option 4: index cards

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, for option 1 in Responding, cut out a string of people figures. For option 4, print Psalm 119:105 (found in the directions) on index cards, one for every two children in the group.

Greet each child. Invite early arrivals to help you set up the worship center with a green cloth, a white battery-powered candle, an offering plate, and a Bible open to 1 Corinthians, with a bookmark at Nehemiah.

When everything is ready, have the children gather around the worship center. Point out the green cloth and recall that this church season is known as Common or Ordinary Time (or Season after the Epiphany), a time when there are no special days or seasons. It is a time for growth, so the color is green. Light the candle as a reminder of Jesus' promise to be with his followers.

Lead this litany:

Leader: Jesus has come.

All: Rejoice, rejoice!

Leader: Today we light the white candle, a symbol of Jesus.

All: Rejoice, rejoice!

Leader: We want to follow Jesus,

All: Rejoice, rejoice!

Leader: We pray for the light of Jesus to show us the way. Amen.

Ask a child to pass the offering plate and then place it by the candle.

To encourage the children to think about people who have taught and are teaching them, ask:

✪ How did you learn to tie your shoes? Make your bed? Ride a bicycle? Learn to pray?

Suggest that, when we want to learn something that is hard to do, we often need someone to teach us, to give us some hints about how to do it. In today's Bible story, a teacher helps the people learn about God's law.

EXPLORING

Have a child retrieve the Bible from the worship center. Point out that it is open to the First Letter to the Corinthians. Part of this letter from Paul to the church in Corinth was in the story in the previous session. Ask:

- ✪ Is 1 Corinthians in the Old Testament or the New Testament part of the Bible?
- ✪ How did you figure out the right answer?

Have the child open the Bible to the bookmark. Tell the group that it is open now to the book of Nehemiah. Ask:

- ✪ Do you think the book of Nehemiah is in the Old Testament or the New Testament?
- ✪ How did you figure out the right answer?

Remind the children that the stories of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures were written long before Jesus was born. They would have been the Bible that Jesus read at the synagogue or heard read there and at the temple.

Tell the story dramatically. This will free the children to act it out with more drama, too.

Tell the story from Nehemiah as given on Resource Sheet 1 (A Holy Day). Help the children recall the story by writing an outline for it on newsprint, using the story on the resource sheet as a guide. When they have an outline with four or five scenes, have them pantomime the story. Assign the parts of Nehemiah, Ezra, the teachers, and the crowd. Keep the story moving by announcing each scene as soon as the previous one is presented. To prepare for Responding, ask:

- ✪ Where can you read about God's law and ways?
- ✪ Who teaches you about it so you can understand?

RESPONDING

Offer at least two options so children have a choice. One might be more challenging to interest older children who can work on their own.

1. **People Chain** This chain will represent people the children call teachers as well as people they might teach. Give each child a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Paper Doll Pattern), a piece of colored copier paper, a pencil, and scissors. Read the directions aloud, one step at a time, as the children follow each step. Each one will have a chain of people figures. After they cut out the dolls, have the children label them with names of people who have taught them about God's word. Tape the chain of figures together. Then invite the children to name people they might teach about God's word in the future. Add these names to another group of figures. Attach it to the chain and hang it in the learning area or a hallway.

EASY
PREP

Sing Thanks to God

Little children, *sing your thanks to God.

Little children, *sing your thanks to God.

Little children, *sing your thanks to God.

Thanks to God. Thanks to God.

Verse 2: *clap

Verse 3: *dance

Verse 4: *shout

Little children, praise the Lord your God.

Little children, praise the Lord your God.

Little children, praise the Lord your God.

Thanks to God. Thanks to God.

Shalom Havarim

Shalom, havarim! Shalom, havarim! Shalom, shalom;

Lehitraot, lehitraot, shalom, shalom.

- 2. Song and Reflection** This option presents another way for the children to reflect on who has helped them learn God's ways. Gather around Color Pack 18. Invite the children to tell what is happening in the picture. Play "Sing Thanks to God" (Color Pack 32; track 15 on *Singing the Feast*, 2018–2019) and invite them to sing along. Distribute small sticky notes and pens. Ask the children to write on the sticky notes the names of people who have helped them learn about God and Jesus. Place them around the edge of Color Pack 18.

Be prepared to help young children write the names they want to add. When everyone has added at least one name, read the names aloud and say "thank you" to God for these teachers.

- 3. Teacher Gifts** The children will recall their teachers of God's word and make gifts for them. Begin by asking each child to think of at least one person who has helped him or her understand the Bible or taught him or her about God or Jesus. Provide the following supplies for the children to make Bible bookmarks to give these teachers: 2" x 8½" strips of card stock and fine-tipped colored markers. On one side, they can write "Thank you for teaching me." On the other side, they can draw symbols of the Bible or church, or illustrate a Bible story. When the bookmark is ready, punch a hole in one end and thread a length of ribbon through it. Tie the ribbon in a knot to secure it. Have enough supplies so children can make more than one bookmark.
- 4. Teaching Each Other** Learning about God's Word never ends. Have the children form pairs to help each other memorize this Bible verse: Your word is a lamp before my feet and a light for my journey (Psalm 119:105, Common English Bible). Give each pair a copy of this verse on an index card. Have the pairs read it together several times. Then one child in the pair tries to say the verse without reading it. The other child in the pair helps when necessary. Continue until both children can say the verse without the card.

CLOSING

Gather around the worship space. Add a green paper link for Common Time (or Season after the Epiphany) to the church year paper chain.

Sing together "Shalom Havarim" (Color Pack 29; track 14 on *Singing the Feast*, 2018–2019).

Pray aloud:

God, thank you for people who teach us about you, from Ezra to teachers in our church. Amen.

Invite the children to respond: *Thank you, God.*

Say good-bye to each child with this blessing: "(Name), look for ways you can teach about God, too."

A Holy Day

based on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

A very long time ago, the army of Babylon captured Israel, God's people, and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, even the temple. Most of the Jewish people were forced to go to Babylon to be slaves. People who are forced to leave their homes and live somewhere else are called exiles. They lived in Babylon for about 50 years. These years are known as the Babylonian Exile. At last, a new king ruled Babylon. He let the Jewish people return to Jerusalem so they could rebuild the temple. This they did. You can read about the rebuilding of the temple in the book of Ezra in the Bible.

When Nehemiah heard that the temple was rebuilt but the city walls of Jerusalem were in terrible condition, he asked permission from the king to return to Jerusalem to repair the city walls. So Nehemiah was appointed governor of the area and in charge of this repair work. This was a huge job, and it would take everyone working together to do it. There were many problems, but Nehemiah and the people kept at the work. Finally, the walls were completed in 52 days.

With all this work done, it was time for Ezra to teach God's Word to the people. Everyone gathered in the square by the Water Gate in the city wall. Men and women, young and old, came to hear Ezra. Ezra climbed up on a wooden platform. He was carrying the scroll with the book of the law of Moses. When he opened the scroll, all the people stood up. Then Ezra read to the people from early morning until midday. Every person listened so intently that you could hear only Ezra's voice and the chirp of a bird from time to time. When he finished for the day, the people bowed their heads and worshiped God.

Ezra had teachers who helped him. These teachers walked among the crowd to help the people understand what Ezra had read to them. The people were so overcome that many of them cried.

Ezra, teacher and scribe, and Nehemiah, governor of the land, said, "Don't cry. This day is holy. Go to your homes and eat and drink. Also take food to people who have nothing to eat today. The joy of God is your strength."

The people did this with great joy, because they had been taught God's law.



Paper Doll Pattern

Directions:

1. Cut a piece of paper ($8\frac{1}{2}$ " x 11") lengthwise to make a sheet $4\frac{1}{4}$ " x 11".
2. Fold the sheet in half, then in half again. (Folded paper will be $2\frac{3}{4}$ " x $4\frac{1}{4}$ ".) Open the sheet and refold it accordion-style.
3. Cut out the pattern below, and trace it on the top layer of the folded paper. Be sure that the arms touch both edges of the folded paper.
4. Cut out the figure, being careful not to cut through the folds at the ends of the arms. Unfold the paper. You will have a chain of paper dolls holding hands.
5. If you want more dolls in your chain, tape two chains of paper dolls together.

