



## LESSON 41

*Israel refuses to be ruled by God*

NEHEMIAH 7:73B-13:31



**True repentance requires a changed heart.**



***“They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them.... But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them” (Neh 9:17).***

## Supporting Truths

1. Repentance is more than saying “I’m sorry.”
2. Repentance involves a recognition and remorse over sin.
3. Repentance involves a return to the Word.
4. Repentance involves running to God, trusting in His mercy.
5. Repentance requires a changed heart.

## Objectives

1. Explain the difference between feeling bad and repenting.
2. Describe how Israel admitted their sin and grieved over it.
3. Describe how the Israelites recommitted themselves to the Mosaic Covenant.
4. Count the times the people’s prayer mentions God’s grace and mercy.
5. Define the New Covenant.

# STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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## Lesson Summary

The temple was rebuilt, worship had been restored, the city walls had been raised, yet in spite of the LORD's faithfulness the people continued to cling to their sin. But at the reading of God's Word, the people recognized their sin and recommitted themselves to keeping the Mosaic Covenant. They pledged to obey God's commands concerning marriage, the Sabbath, and the temple. Yet not long after Nehemiah's return to Persia, the people returned to their sin, committing the very same acts of disobedience they pledged to avoid.

## Spotlight on the Gospel

The law could not save the Israelites in Nehemiah's day. Its purpose is to expose sin by displaying God's holiness. But it cannot save from sin. There is only one person who can save us from sin—Jesus Christ. God did what the law could not do when He sent His Son in order to fulfill the requirement of the law. Under this new covenant, God Himself changes people's hearts, granting the gift of repentance and faith, resulting in eternal life.

TWO WEEKS AGO



God guides Israel to  
repentance  
*Ezra 7:1–10:44*

LAST WEEK



God leads Nehemiah to  
reconstruct the wall  
*Nehemiah 1:1–7:73a*

THIS WEEK



Israel refuses to be ruled  
by God  
*Nehemiah 7:73b–13:31*

RETURN



## Lesson Commentary

*True repentance requires a changed heart.*

The LORD had providentially provided for the people to rebuild His temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22). He also guided the people to restore worship (Ezra 7:1–10:44). He even graciously strengthened the people to rebuild the city's walls (Neh 1:1–7:73a). Yet, in spite of God's faithfulness, the people once again returned to their sin. Not long after confessing their sin and committing themselves to the Mosaic covenant, Nehemiah returned to find the people engaged in the very same sins they had pledged to avoid. They were back in the holy city, but their hearts remained as hard as ever.

### The people recognized their own sinfulness (7:73b–9:37)

Less than one week after finishing the walls, the people gathered on the first day of the seventh month (8:2). This day was the Feast of Trumpets (Num 29:1–6), and that month also included the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:26–32), and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or Ingathering) (Neh 8:13–18). On the first day, Ezra read God's Word from morning till noon, and the people responded with weeping (8:2–9). The people wept because they realized that they had broken God's law. Conviction over sin

produces a **godly sorrow** (2 Cor 7:8–10), true sadness because we know how much our sin offends the holy God. This godly grief, produced by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 2:25), is an essential part of true repentance.

But since Jewish feast days were joyful events (Deut 12:12; 16:11), the people were encouraged to rejoice that day and not weep (Neh 8:9). And they did rejoice, because even when it convicts of sin, God's law also fills the heart with joy (Neh 8:12; Ps 19:8). They also rejoiced when they celebrated the Feast of Booths as the law required (8:13–14). This feast was joyful because it celebrated God's goodness, remembering how God had provided for Israel in the wilderness. Although they began this feast earlier than normal (Lev 23:33–44), it was nevertheless

celebrated with a depth of meaning that had not taken place since Joshua's time (8:17)!

The time for celebration ended, so in the spirit of the Day of Atonement, the people were heartbroken over their sin (Neh 9:1; Lev 16:1–34; 23:26–32). After another three hours reading the law, they spent three more hours worshipping and confessing (Neh 9:3). First, they praised God's glorious name as revealed in history (9:5). **Yahweh** is creator (9:6), covenant keeper (9:7–8), redeemer (9:9–11), guide (9:12), provider (9:13–15, 20–21), faithful lover (9:16–19), victorious warrior (9:22–25), and patient discipliner (9:26–31). Remembering how gracious and righteous God is helped the people realize how great their rebellion was (9:32–35). But it also gave them hope, so they turned once again to their merciful God for help in their present and well-deserved distress (9:36–37). Today, God is still faithful and righteous. Therefore, we too must confess our sins, and we too may fly to Him for mercy (1 John 1:8–9).

### The people reaffirmed the Mosaic Covenant (9:38–13:3)

This time of worship culminated in the people recommitting themselves to the Mosaic Covenant (9:38), much like the second generation had done on the Plains of Moab (Deut 29:1–30:10). Although only leaders, the Levites, and the priests signed the document, they represented the entire community (Neh 10:1–28). Every person was responsible to obey God's law. The people specifically addressed areas where they were prone to failure. First, they rejected foreign marriage to guard the holiness of God's people (10:30). Second, they honored the Sabbath to trust and rest in God alone (10:31). Third, they provided for the temple to worship God by atoning for sin and serving Him (10:32–39). Their commitment shows that true repentance must result in the fruit of righteousness (Matt 3:8).

After they repented, God allowed the settlement of the land to be completed, just as He had promised (Deut 30:2–3). Until now, Jerusalem was dangerously unpopulated. Some



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Do you feel the same way as God does about your sin?



#### THINK ABOUT IT

When you confess sin, do you go on to radically turn from sin?

# STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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Jews bravely volunteered to move to the holy city in order to protect it and restore its prestige (11:2, 6, 14). Out of devotion to God, they gave up their original homes and risked living in a city that was under threat of attack. Since there were not enough volunteers, others had to be chosen by lot (11:1). This marked the final stage of the return from exile. Now the altar, temple, and Jerusalem were rebuilt, the people were reformed, and the city and land were resettled.

Chapter 12 celebrates the completed work. First, it emphasizes the unity and continuity of the post-exilic Jews as God's people. It does this by listing the priests and Levites who had returned to Jerusalem since the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (12:1–26). Second, Nehemiah led the people to dedicate the walls with two grand processions encircling the city and joining together at the temple (12:27–43). They worshiped, because God Himself filled them with great joy (12:43). This was the blessing for obedience that God intended for His people all along (Lev 26; Duet 28). Third, the people provided for temple worship and the Levites carried it out, while the people continued to learn from God's law and respond obediently (Neh 12:44–13:3). Thus repentance results in joyful restoration and a right relationship to God.

### The people returned to their sin (13:4–31)

However this joy would be short-lived. Nehemiah left Jerusalem and returned to Persia as promised (13:6; 2:6). During his stay in Persia, the people had departed from God and returned to their former sins. Worst of all, this defection was led by Israel's high priest, Eliashib (13:4–5), which is why the prophet Malachi condemned the priests and the people for abandoning God. In fact, they disobeyed in the specific areas they had promised to obey. First, they neglected the temple (13:10), failing to support proper worship. Second, they violated the Sabbath, failing to live by faith in God (13:15–16) and repeating the sin that had led to exile in the first place (2 Chr 36:20–21). Finally, they intermarried with foreigners

(Neh 13:23–24), repeating Solomon's great sin (1 Kings 11:1–6) and endangering pure worship. They even allowed foreigners—Tobiah the Ammonite—in the temple (13:4–7).

Nehemiah's rebuke was violent. He threw out Tobiah's things (13:8), closed the gates on the Sabbath and threatened to attack the foreign merchants (13:19–21), and physically beat men who had married foreigners (13:25). This seems harsh, but it was right. Nehemiah was motivated by faithful love for God and God's people, and he understood the deadly danger of these sins (13:14). Those who love God rightly hate whatever is opposed to God.

While Nehemiah was faithful to the end, the people were not. Though the people had committed *to turn away from sin*, they showed their **repentance** was false when they quickly returned to sin. Nehemiah had led the people to rebuild the city's walls, but he could not give them new hearts. So the last recorded portion of Old Testament Scripture—Nehemiah 13—shows that Israel still desperately needed the new hearts promised in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–34).

Nehemiah mourned over Israel's continuing sin, but that time of mourning is now over! The New Covenant has come, because Jesus established it by His blood (Luke 22:20). So what the Law or Nehemiah could not do—save people from their sin—God did “by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:3–4). Under this new covenant, it is the Spirit Himself who changes people's hearts (Jer 31:31–34; John 3:1–8; Rom 8:1–11), so that lasting repentance and faith come to us as a gift from God (Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 2:25).

**THINK ABOUT IT**  
Out of love for God and His people, do you hate and oppose sin in yourself and in your community?



# Lesson Outline

*True repentance requires a changed heart.*

## AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Repentance says, “I have sinned” (7:73b–9:37).
2. Repentance says, “I need to obey God’s word” (9:38–13:3).
3. Repentance says, “I need God to give me new life” (13:4–31).

## AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. The people recognized their own sinfulness (7:73b–9:37).
  - Ezra read from the law and the people celebrated the Feast of Booths (7:73b–8:18).
  - The people assembled and read God’s word (9:1–4).
  - The people praised God, confessed sin, and sought mercy (9:5–37).
2. The people reaffirmed the Mosaic Covenant (9:38–13:3).
  - The people reaffirmed the Mosaic Covenant (9:38–10:39).
  - The people repopulated the city of Jerusalem (11:1–36).
  - The people celebrated because the work was complete (12:1–13:3).
3. The people returned to their sin (13:4–31).
  - Nehemiah cleansed the temple and restored the offerings (13:4–14).
  - Nehemiah stopped the people from breaking the Sabbath (13:15–22).
  - Nehemiah punished those who had married foreign women (13:23–31).



# TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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## Lesson Questions

*Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.*



### Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

- 1. What did Ezra read to the people on the holy day?**  
He read God's word—for four hours!
- 2. What did the people do when they heard the Law read?**  
They cried. They realized they had broken God's Law.
- 3. What did the people promise to do?**  
They promised to separate from all non-Israelites, to keep the Sabbath, and to provide for the temple.
- 4. Did the people keep their promise?**  
No. When Nehemiah returned from Persia, he found the people living in sin.



### Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

- 1. Why were the people told to rejoice even though they wept over their sin?**  
Because it was a day to celebrate God's goodness. They also rejoiced because they understood God's law.
- 2. After the celebration, how did the people physically show their sorrow over sin?**  
They fasted, dressed in sackcloth, and put dust on their heads.
- 3. What does their prayer show us about repentance?**  
It shows that repentance begins with understanding and praising God for all that He is. Then the truth about God exposes our sin but also gives us hope in His mercy.
- 4. What does the people's recommitment to the covenant show about repentance?**  
Repentance is not just being sad. It is also a choice to turn away from what is wrong and toward what is right.
- 5. Why were the three specific commitments important?**  
Separating from foreigners guarded pure worship, keeping the Sabbath guarded true faith, and giving for the temple guarded ongoing worship.
- 6. Why did the Israelites need people to resettle Jerusalem?**  
They needed more people to live there to protect it and restore its honor as the holy city.
- 7. What does the people's joy afterward show about repentance?**  
Repentance brings blessing, because it restores us to a right relationship with God.
- 8. What does the people's failure in the end show about repentance?**  
True repentance requires God Himself, by the Holy Spirit, to change our hearts.

## Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

### HAPPY AND SAD

Ask the children what makes them happy and what makes them sad. Tell them that the Israelites were happy to hear God's Word and sad when they were disobedient to God.

### BUILD A BOOTH

Make a booth by draping blankets over tables. Real branches can be gathered to put on top of the blankets, or green branches can be made from construction paper and taped to the blankets. Tell the class, "Today, we will learn about how the Israelites listened to Bible stories for hours in the hot sun." You might tell the Bible story standing in front of your "booth."



ILLUSTRATE

### THE BIBLE SAYS

Tell the children that every time they hear a teacher say "the Bible says..." they should stand up. Intentionally say this phrase frequently. During the lesson, explain that the people stood up whenever the Book of the Law was read.

### FOLLOWING THE BIBLE

Divide the children into pairs, and give each pair a baseball cap with a Bible sticker on it. The child who wears the cap is the leader, and the other child should imitate whatever he does (while standing in one place). After a while, have the children switch. Explain that we are to do what the Bible says, following it with our actions.



APPLY

### EZRA'S SCROLL

*See Year 2 Craft Book, Book 2.*

**Materials:** Craft sheet, brown construction paper, scissors, glue, and crayons.

**Directions:** Pre-cut the picture from the craft sheet. Have children color the picture. Glue the picture to the center of a sheet of brown construction paper. Help the students to roll the edges to make it look like a scroll.



*Ezra's Scroll*  
*See Year 2 Craft Book, Book 2*



# TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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AGES 6–8



## WHO'S WHO

What is your family known for? Do you have all girls? All boys? Ten kids? Do you all have red hair? Do you all sing? Do you and your siblings all have first names beginning with the same letter? The Israelites were known for something. They were known for being God's chosen people and for having the Law of Moses to live by. Nehemiah 8:1 says that when the Israelites gathered, they read from the book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given them. What would you like to be known by?

## HAPPY AND SAD

Have the children think of things that make them happy and things that make them sad. Is there anything that makes them both happy and sad at the same time? There was something that made the Israelites so sad that they cried, but it also made them joyful. What was it? We will find out in today's lesson.



## EZRA READS FROM THE SCROLL

Instruct one child or teacher to stand up on a chair as Ezra did and read each of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20. After each commandment is read, have a different child volunteer to explain it (as Ezra's helpers did), and give examples of how the Law would be obeyed in various situations.

## COPY-CAT

Play a short game of copy-cat where the children try to repeat everything you say. Try to come up with some goofy phrases that the children will have a hard time remembering or pronouncing. Use this activity to explain what it means to confess: to say the same thing that God does about our sin. In our lesson today, the people recognized their sin and said the same thing about it that God did.

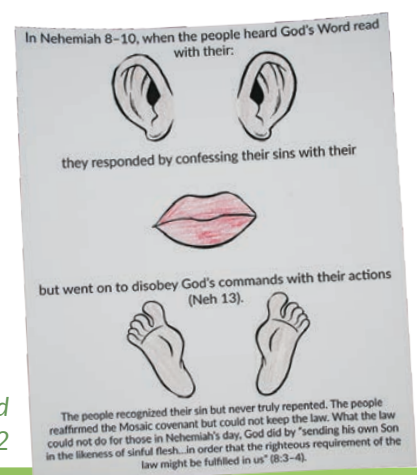


## PEOPLE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

*See Year 2 Craft Book, Book 2.*

**Materials:** Craft sheets, glue, scissors, and crayons.

**Directions:** Have the students color and cut out the ears, mouth, and feet from the first craft sheet. Then they should glue them to the appropriate places on the second craft sheet.



*People Respond to God's Word  
See Year 2 Craft Book, Book 2*

AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

### IN ONE EAR AND OUT THE OTHER

When people don't listen, it is said that the words "went in one ear and out the other." Have you ever been accused of this? In today's lesson we will see that God's Word should not go in one ear and out the other. Instead, it should be listened to and acted on. It not only must enter our ears but also must change how we think, feel, and act.

### AS GOD SEES

Ask the children if they have ever watched a video of themselves talking or singing. Were they surprised at how they looked or sounded? It is common for people to be surprised by how they actually look and sound when watching themselves on video. This experience can be quite revealing. For those who earn a living speaking in public, this exercise can help reveal personal quirks and habits that listeners may find distracting. Explain that the Bible, like a video, calls attention to our sins and departures from God's commands. As we read God's word and examine His standard of right and wrong, all our sins are revealed.



ILLUSTRATE

### INVISIBLE PROTECTION

While the Jews could not see, sense, or feel God's protection over them, He had guarded them throughout their long history (Neh 9:4–37). To illustrate this, explain that sunblock protects us from burning; medications, vaccinations, and vitamins protect us from disease; and insect repellent protects us from unwanted bites. We cannot see or feel these things working, but we can be assured that they are. The Bible promises us that even when we cannot feel, see, or discern it, God is always caring for and protecting us.

### A HOLY NATION

God's people, the Israelites, were to be a holy nation. This is why God forbid them to marry foreign wives. God knew that their idolatry would infect their husbands, causing them to depart from God. This can be illustrated with a handshake. Ask for a volunteer to shake your hand. However, before extending your hand, pretend to sneeze into it. Ask the child if they still want to shake your hand. You might also cough into your hand or use your fingers to pretend to pick your nose. Explain that in order to remain healthy and germ free, the children must avoid shaking your hand.



APPLY

### WHAT MAKES YOU SAD?

Have you confessed your sin today? There is a good chance that you need to! We sin every day, and we should be sad about our sin. It should make us sad to disobey God. In today's lesson, the people were very sad when they found out that they had been disobedient to God. They repented of their sin before God. Is this what you do when you realize your sin before God? The right reaction is repentance from sin and a commitment to obeying His instructions.