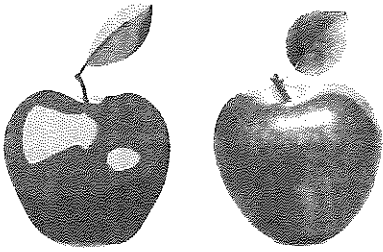


God Relates



Topic

God's person

Theme

God is a person Who relates to humanity according to His holiness.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will align his understanding of God's person with Scripture and will respond accordingly.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 4
- Slips of paper

Scripture Focus

Gen. 3; 12:1–3; Neh. 9; Jer. 31:3; Lam. 3:22, 23; John 3:16; Rom. 3:21–26; 5:17–21; 8:38, 39; 1 John 1:9

Summary

God continued to be faithful to Israel throughout the nation's history. After a remnant of Jews returned from captivity, a group of Levites led the Jews in covenant renewal. They offered a prayer prior to the nation's renewal. The prayer records God's faithfulness in His relationships. It communicates that God relates to humanity according to His holiness.

Outline

I. God Is the Creator and Sustainer

- A. God is a person (Neh. 9:5, 6)
- B. God is relational (Gen. 3; 12:1–3; Neh. 9:7; John 3:16; Rom. 5:17–21)

II. God Is Faithful in His Relationships

- A. God is righteous and just (Neh. 9:8, 33–35; Rom. 3:21–26; 1 John 1:9)
- B. God is gracious and loving (Neh. 9:7–27; Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:38, 39)
- C. God is merciful (Neh. 9:19, 27, 28, 31; Lam. 3:22, 23)
- D. God is patient and slow to anger (Neh. 9:29, 30)

Memory Verse

"Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee" (Nehemiah 9:6).

GETTING STARTED

I Never Knew

Give each learner a slip of paper. Have them write one fact about themselves or their experiences that is unusual and unknown to most of the other people in the class. Collect the slips of paper. After reading each fact, let the learners guess who wrote it before you ask the author to identify himself.

ASK: What were you most surprised to learn?

ASK: What is the connection between knowing someone and relating to him or her in a meaningful way? *We cannot meaningfully relate to someone we don't know. The relationship will be surface and superficial.*

God is self-existent, eternal, holy, omnipotent, sovereign, omniscient, and omnipresent. But He is also righteous, just, gracious, loving, merciful, patient, and slow to anger. God is a person. We are responsible to understand God and to relate to Him accordingly. That is what this lesson is about.

How Would You Respond?

Read the following scenarios and ask the learners how they would respond to each one. Limit the number of responses to keep the activity moving.

- You come home to find that your dog has torn a giant hole in your favorite chair.
- Your daughter calls and says she just drove your car into a pole.
- You got a note from your great uncle. He wants to give you a substantial amount of money as a part of his estate settlement.
- You overhear a coworker talking negatively about you.
- Your boss gives you a bad annual review because he thinks you should be working longer hours.

ASK: On what basis do we respond to others? (Q1) *On the basis of our character.*

ASK: On what basis does God relate to others? (Q2) *On the basis of His character.*

We learned in the last session that God is holy. As a person, He relates to humanity based on His holy character. This session will help us understand what God is like as a person. Our responsibility is to relate to Him accordingly.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The previous lesson left off with Israel's desire to define Who God is. They showed that desire at Mount Sinai (Exod. 32) and later when they were in the Promised Land (1 Kings 16:29–34). Eventually God judged His people for their rebellion against Him. He used Assyria in 722 BC to take the Northern Kingdom of Israel captive, and He used Babylon in 586 BC to take the Southern Kingdom of Judah

Judah's captivity actually lasted 70 years (Jer. 29:10) when the year of their first deportation to Babylon (605 BC) is considered. Their final deportation and the destruction of Jerusalem happened in 586 BC.

captive. Israel never returned from captivity, while a small remnant of Jews from the Southern Kingdom returned to the Promised Land about 50 years after Jerusalem fell. The remnant rebuilt the temple and repaired the ruined walls. When the walls were rebuilt, Ezra read from the book of the law and explained it to the people (Neh. 8:1–3). As the people reflected on their history and their continuing captivity in the Promised Land, they understood how unfaithful they had been as a nation. In response, they confessed their sins and worshiped God (9:3).

As part of Israel's worship and confession, the Levites led in a public prayer. They stood on stairs and prayed with a loud voice to God for all the people to hear (Neh. 9:4, 5). Their prayer focused on God and His faithfulness to their unfaithful nation. Their words help us understand that God is relational and that He always acts based on His perfect, holy character. This lesson's main points are based on the Levites' informative prayer.

I. God Is the Creator and Sustainer

A. God is a person (Neh. 9:5, 6)

The Levites began their prayer with by acknowledging the greatness of God's name (9:5). They called on the people to stand and bless the Lord. The Levites then turned their attention to God and addressed Him directly.

READ: Nehemiah 9:6. **ASK:** The Levites said God alone is the Lord. Why was that admission so important? (Q3) *The Levites recognized that God is the ultimate reality. Everything else is defined and determined from the truth that He alone is the LORD.*

See the books of Haggai and Zechariah for descriptions of sin problems in post-exilic Israel. Both of these books were written around the time of the rebuilding of the temple. So they come chronologically before the prayer in Nehemiah 9. Malachi offers additional insight into the sin problems that developed in Israel. Malachi was probably written after the prayer in Nehemiah 9 and around the time of Nehemiah's second return to Israel in Nehemiah 13.

Israel's captivity taught them that God alone is the Lord. So when they returned to the land, they didn't practice idolatry. They had other sin problems, though, including insincere ritualism in their worship, mistreatment of others, and immorality.

ASK: What responsibilities to God come with being part of His creation (Neh. 9:6)? (Q4) *The responsibilities to glorify, know, worship, serve, and obey God.*

God's creative works demonstrate He is a personal being. As such, all His created beings are responsible to know and worship Him (Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11). Wicked men devised the big bang theory and the theory of evolution to intentionally undermine the idea of God as creator. Supporters of the theories believe the theories have sufficiently explained the origins of the universe and humanity. So they conclude there must not be a higher power to which they are responsible. As a result, they worship someone or something other than the one true God.

The "host of heaven" (Neh. 9:6) knows better. They worship God. They know He is the Person Who created them and everything else in Heaven and the earth, sky, and sea and that He preserves, or sustains, all of His Creation.

B. God is relational (Gen. 3; 12:1–3; Neh. 9:7; John 3:16; Rom. 5:17–21)

As creator of all, God is inherently personal. Adam and Eve had personal communion with God in the Garden of Eden. They walked and talked with Him and

enjoyed fellowshiping with Him. But eventually they sinned and destroyed their fellowship with God (Gen. 3). As a result, everyone is born a sinner who is at enmity with God (Rom. 5:12). Only God could act to allow humanity to fellowship with Him again. God did act, putting His plan of redemption into motion. His redemptive plan began to take shape when He chose Abram and made promises to him.

The Levites' prayer naturally turned to the topic of the call of Abram (Neh. 9:7). Abram marked their beginning as a nation. God promised Abram that He would make of him a great nation and give that nation a land. He also promised that through Abram all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). The nations of the earth were blessed when Jesus, God's Son and descendant of Abraham, came to earth and died on the cross for the sins of the world (Rom. 5:17–21).

God gave humanity hope through Jesus because He loves people (John 3:16). He gives forgiveness of sin and eternal life to all who trust in Christ's death on the cross as the payment for their sins.

Obviously, God is not an impersonal distant force. God reached down to humanity and gave His best—His Son—to provide a way for humanity to have a restored personal relationship with Him.

II. God Is Faithful in His Relationships

God's specific relationship to Israel could be summarized with one word: faithful. The Levites' prayer echoed God's faithfulness to their ancestors. At the same time, they recounted how unfaithful their nation had been throughout its history.

READ: Nehemiah 9:8. **ASK:** In what terms did the Levites note God's faithfulness? (Q5) *They said God "performed" His word, meaning God kept His promise to Abraham.*

God is still faithful to keep His promises and to stay true to His character. We, like the Israelites, can count on God to be faithful.

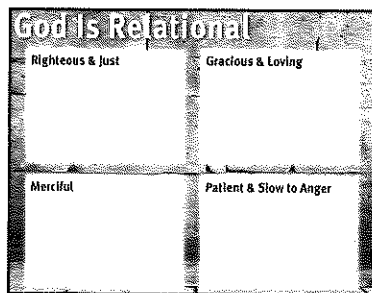
A. God is righteous and just (Neh. 9:8, 33–35; Rom. 3:21–26; 1 John 1:9)

God is faithful because He is righteous (9:8). God can only do that which is right and according to His holy character. That truth comforted Israel, but it also served as a warning. God's righteousness, or justice, demands He must do what is right as He judges humanity. God cannot ignore sin or excuse it. His justice demands that He judge sin.

READ: Nehemiah 9:33–35. **ASK:** What did the Levites conclude when they thought about all the trouble that God brought on them? (Q6) *They concluded that God was just, or right, in bringing all the trouble. God was faithful to them while they continued to do wickedly.*

As believers, we can have forgiveness of sins even though God is just. God's justice is satisfied by Christ's death on the cross (Rom. 3:21–26). If we confess our sins, God is faithful and right (just) to forgive us our sins and cleanse us because Christ's death on the cross satisfied God's just demand that we pay the penalty for our sin (1 John 1:9).

God's plan of redemption is from eternity past. Christ is the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). More on God's plan of redemption is included in lesson 4



RESOURCE: Display resource 4. **DISCUSS:** How should the righteousness and justice of God impact our lives? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q7) *We should not think we have a license to sin. We should confess our sins immediately. We should grow in Christlikeness and be characterized by less sin.*

B. God is gracious and loving (Neh. 9:7–27; Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:38, 39)

God faithfully gave to Israel throughout her history. The Levites recognized that and listed many of the benefits their nation received by virtue of being God’s people.

READ: Nehemiah 9:7–27. **ASK:** Mark all the times God gave something or someone in the passage. On what basis did God give to Israel? (Q8) *God gave on the basis of His gracious character. He gave to Israel blessings they neither earned nor deserved.*

Never once in the Levites’ prayer did they list a blessing from God as payment for something Israel had done. They deserved none of the blessings they received from God. But He graciously gave them the blessings anyway.

Every person receives God’s grace every day. Air to breathe and food to eat are measures of God’s grace. Most people are oblivious to what God gives them. Some have the audacity to complain that they don’t have more.

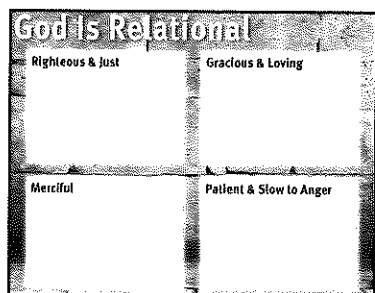
God’s love is what motivates His gracious giving.

READ: Jeremiah 31:3. **ASK:** What are the characteristics of an everlasting love? (Q9) *It always has been, and it forever will be. No one can thwart it. It is not based on circumstances, so it never wavers.*

God’s love is beyond our comprehension. The apostle Paul used several word pictures to try to help us understand how deep God’s love is for us.

READ: Romans 8:38, 39. **ASK:** What impresses you the most about the limitlessness of God’s love? (Q10)

As believers on this side of the cross, we understand what it means for the love of God to be “in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Sending His Son to the cross to die for our sins is the ultimate testimony of God’s love for us. Salvation that comes because of the cross is the ultimate measure of God’s grace.



RESOURCE: Display resource 4. **DISCUSS:** How should the love and grace of God impact our lives? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q11) *We should rejoice in His love and grace, tell others of His love and grace, and be grateful for what we have. We should be gracious, kind, loving, and good in our relationships with others. We should ask God for His enabling grace to help in times of need.*

C. God is merciful (Neh. 9:19, 27, 28, 31; Lam. 3:22, 23)

While grace is God giving people blessings they don’t deserve, mercy is God withholding judgment they do deserve. The Levites repeatedly mentioned God’s mercy toward Israel.

READ: Nehemiah 9:19, 27, 28, 31. **ASK:** What did Israel deserve that God

withheld from them? (Q12) *They deserved to be forsaken (v. 19), to be left under the control of enemies (vv. 27, 28), and to be utterly consumed (v. 31).*

If Israel got what they deserved, the nation would not exist today. God would have wiped them out long ago. But His mercy is great. It endures forever.

READ: Lamentations 3:22, 23. **ASK:** Jeremiah wrote this soon after Judah was taken captive by Babylon. What moved God to be merciful and to refrain from consuming His people? (Q13) *His compassions that failed not and that were new every morning.*

Like the Levites in Nehemiah's day, we should never forget God's mercy toward us.

RESOURCE: Display resource 4. **DISCUSS:** How should God's mercy impact our lives? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q14) *We should thank God for His mercy. We should be merciful as we relate to others. We should desire to live for God out of gratitude for His mercy to us.*

D. God is patient and slow to anger (Neh. 9:29, 30)

Alongside God's mercy is His patience and slowness to anger. God in His mercy relieved Israel from oppression by their enemies. By His patience, God testified against Israel and gave the nation opportunities to return to Him (Neh. 9:29, 30). But Israel acted presumptuously and proudly. They did not heed God's commands and sinned against Him instead. They rejected the truth that those who keep God's commands live by them (cf. Lev. 18:5). They shrugged their shoulders and stiffened their necks. They were not going to follow God's commands no matter what. Their actions were childish but serious.

God waited many years for Israel to repent. He sent His prophets, who warned them by the Spirit. At last, God's patience ran out.

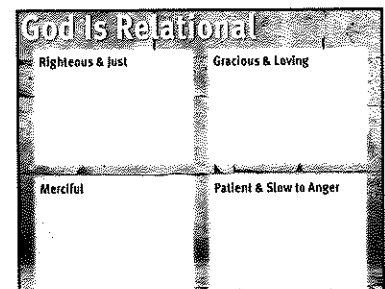
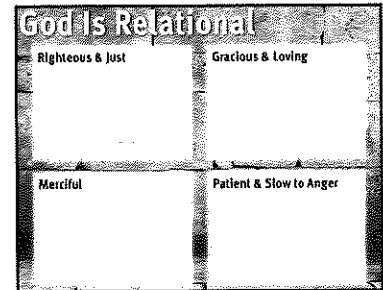
READ: Nehemiah 9:30. **ASK:** How is the "giving" in this verse different from the "giving" in the rest of the passage? (Q15) *In this verse God gave Israel to her enemies. In the rest of the passage God gave Israel blessings.*

The Levites' prayer purposefully tracks God's gracious giving up to the point of God giving Israel into the hands of her enemies. The irony is obvious.

We should not let this lesson escape us. "Slowness to anger" doesn't mean "no anger." God sent His people into captivity for their prolonged rebellion and refusal to hear the Lord. God's patience is a blessing, but it is not a license to continue in sin. God will chasten those He loves and graciously blesses (Heb. 12:5, 6).

RESOURCE: Display resource 4. **DISCUSS:** How should God's patience and slowness to anger impact our lives? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q16) *We should be patient as we relate to others. We should not take advantage of God's patience as if He would indefinitely withhold chastisement for our sin. We should use God's patience as an opportunity to enlist God's help in overcoming sin.*

At the end of the Levites' prayer, they state the fact that God gave the Promised Land to their fathers along with many good things (Neh. 9:35). Yet the Jews are living in the Promised Land as servants (9:36). "Look at us!" they in essence said.



“We are servants in the land that God *gave* to our Fathers!”

The Persians controlled the land and forced the Jews to give them the bountiful fruit of the land (9:37). The freedom and control their fathers grasped for in rebellion against God led to their captivity in the Promised Land.

The Levites’ prayer ended with a covenant renewal. The history of their nation’s unfaithfulness against the backdrop of God’s righteousness, justice, grace, love, mercy, patience, and slowness to anger motivated them to respond to God. No doubt they thought about what might have been had their fathers done the same.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Reality Check, Take Two

ASK: What does your life reveal about what you actually believe about God’s actions? (Q17)

Like in the last lesson, this is an important step in seeing change in your learners’ lives. They need to prayerfully come to grips with who they really are if they are going to live in the real.

Right Responses, Take Two

RESOURCE: Display resource 4. **ASK:** Which of the responses to God’s person are true of your life? Which are not? (Q18) Give the learners opportunities to list more responses as they think of them.

ASK: What are the consequences of ignoring or dismissing how God relates to us? (Q19) *We will not have a close relationship with God and probably struggle with sin. We will not develop good relationships with others and will miss the blessings God wants to give us.*

ASK: What steps will you take to adjust your beliefs about God? (Q20) *Like the previous lesson, the steps should include a daily dose of Scripture memory and Bible study.*

Remind your learners that they cannot please God if they don’t believe God “is” and that He is a rewarder of those who “seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

Summary and Memory Verse

RESOURCE: Display resource 1. Add a summary statement for lesson 3 or use the following: Live in response to God’s person.

Encourage learners to memorize Nehemiah 9:6. Give them an opportunity to say the verse in class next week.

