

# **Ezra and Nehemiah**



# Ezra and Nehemiah

*The Good Hand of Our  
God Is upon Us*

Sarah Ivill



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*Ezra and Nehemiah*

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To

**Our God,**

*the great, the mighty,*

*and awesome God,*

*who keeps covenant and mercy.*

—Nehemiah 9:32



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# Foreword

History, however dark and difficult, is always God's story, His story. God never forgets His promises. No obstacle, however powerful and threatening, is too daunting for God. The rise and fall of empires and kingdoms are under the control of an all-powerful, triune God. Though powerful kings and even tyrants play their part, nothing happens without God's microcosmic superintendence. And nowhere is this truth clearer than in the opening of the book of Ezra. The long night of exile is over, and the promise of a new beginning has arrived. God has moved the heart of the king of Persia to conquer the Babylonians and thereafter free the Israelites from their captivity (Ezra 1:1).

Trusting God in dark times is difficult. It is easier to focus on the massive, seemingly insurmountable obstacles that obscure our vision. Doing so drains all energy. We lose sight of the goal. We lose sight of God. Faith grows weak. And at such times, we need to recall the guarantees and certainties of God's covenant promises to establish His kingdom, send His Son, build His church, and, in the end, gather His people to Himself in a new heaven and new earth. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the tale of how the promise of God to do just that is rekindled.

The book of Ezra opens in the year 538 BC, a half century after the collapse of Jerusalem to the invading Babylonians in 587 BC. In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's most impressive ruler, exiled more than ten thousand of Israel's finest, including a young teenager named Daniel. Seven years later, in 598 BC, a young Ezekiel suffered the same experience. The long, dark shadow of exile is ending, and the promise of a new beginning is on the horizon. Two centuries earlier, Isaiah foretold Israel's deliverance from captivity in Babylon through Cyrus, the Persian king (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). The book of Ezra begins with a reading of the Persian king's emancipation order.

Ezra is a man of the Word, a preacher-reformer (Ezra 7:6, 10–12, 21, 23, 25–26). He is God's man for a particular moment in the life of God's people. Scripture is once more central in the life of God's people in their new home under his leadership.

The book of Ezra takes us on a journey that covers a lifetime (about eighty years). It is a journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, from darkness to light, from exile to freedom. It is a story of new beginnings, of reformation and revival, of corporate worship

and marital fidelity. It is the story of how God raises preachers to expound his Word and make it relevant and applicable in the very contexts in which we find ourselves.

And the book of Nehemiah continues the story told in Ezra. Unlike Ezra, whose focus was on spiritual reform and adherence to the law of God, Nehemiah's task was much more administrative and practical—to oversee the rebuilding of the defensive walls of the city and motivate the people, those who lived both in the city and out in the hinterlands, to join together in this task.

The book is named after its central figure, who first appears as a cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes. Taking courage into both hands and frequently resorting to prayer, Nehemiah asks his master to send him to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of the city's walls and restore order to a city that appears in bad shape. Artaxerxes agrees, and Nehemiah becomes the king's representative and governor to Jerusalem. The book tells the tale of the civil engineering project he oversaw and the problems he encountered. The entire book covers a period of around thirteen years in Jerusalem's turbulent history.

The book of Nehemiah contains some of Nehemiah's personal records, including lists and genealogies. Much of the book portrays Nehemiah himself, who emerges as a man of great courage and tenacity, a faithful and effective leader, prayerful, with skills in administration, providing motivation and issuing rebuke to the point that may appear petulant by modern standards. Nehemiah encountered some of the same moral and spiritual problems that his predecessor Ezra encountered, including issues related to marriage. Nehemiah demonstrates the importance of theology and faith in the work of reformation. The book also demonstrates how quickly the work of reformation can decline and disappear. At such times, Nehemiah's urgent appeals to repent and trust in the Lord are powerfully effective.

There are practical lessons to be learned from these books, and Sarah Ivill's brilliant and insightful analysis of these chapters will clearly demonstrate how valuable a thing it is to study Ezra and Nehemiah. As you read these pages, you have a sure guide to help you grasp the message God intends for you to learn.

—Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister  
First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, South Carolina

# A Note from Sarah

Many women today are drowning in despair, flailing their arms in futility, and sinking in seas of sin and suffering. They reach out to false, futile saviors, clinging to things or relationships that are as capable of saving them as sticks floating in the sea and the wind that crashes with each wave. This is tragic, especially because the lifeboat that could secure them to the heaviest anchor is right in front of them. But they continue to try to save themselves, shirking the secure way.

Perhaps no one has told them that the lifeboat, the Word of God, is their very life because it reveals Jesus Christ, the Anchor of their souls and the One to whom all Scripture points. Only as women are steeped in the Scriptures that point them to the Savior will they swim in hope, surf waves in security, and stand on shore anchored to the truth.

Let us return to being women of one Book above all others. If you have time to read only one book, make it Scripture. Then, if you have time to read more, you will be well trained to tell the difference between what merely tickles your ears and what mightily transforms your heart.

My love for teaching the Bible was inspired by my own hunger to study it. Longing for the “meat” of God’s Word and finding it lacking in so many churches today, I enrolled in Bible Study Fellowship after graduating from high school. It was there that I realized my desire to attend seminary and was influenced and encouraged by a strong godly woman and mentor in my life to attend Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). During this time I was leading women through in-depth Bible studies and caught a glimpse of how much women desired to be fed the depth of God’s Word. This encouraged me even further to receive an education that would best prepare me to deliver God’s Word to women who hungered for the truth.

Upon graduating with my master of theology from DTS, I took a position as assistant director of women’s ministry at a large church where I served under a woman who shared my same passion to teach the “meat” of God’s Word. Within the year, I had assumed the role of director and delved into teaching the Bible in an expository and applicable manner. After three years I resigned in order to stay home with my first child. During those years at home, the Lord used my experience in seminary and

ministry to lead me back to my roots and the full embracing of Reformed theology. Raised for the first half of my childhood in conservative Presbyterian churches, I had been grounded in the Reformed faith and Reformed catechisms from an early age. But from middle school on, I was not in Reformed churches. The questions in my twenties then became, What do I really believe?

One of the first steps on my journey was contacting a Reformed seminary and asking for a list of books covering everything I had missed by not attending a Reformed seminary. That began my reading of some of the most renowned Reformed theologians in the world. It was during those days that the question What do I really believe? was finally answered, and I began teaching women based on my understanding of Reformed theology. In fact, that is how my first Bible study came to be written. I had the incredible privilege of teaching that first study to a wonderful group of women for a morning Bible study at our Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) church. And it was from their encouragement and exhortation that I submitted the study for publication.

I want to encourage you as you embark upon the study of Ezra and Nehemiah. As you read, ponder what the Bible has to say about the depth of our sin and the judgment we deserve, and rejoice at the wonders of grace and salvation. In every chapter keep your eyes on Jesus, the One to whom all Scripture points, and worship Him for the work of salvation that He has accomplished for you through the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. *Soli Deo gloria!*

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Thank you to my dad and mom, David and Judy Gelaude, who have always supported me in my love of the Word and encouraged me to do that which the Lord has called me to do. I love you both very much.

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And thank you to my children—Caleb, Hannah, Daniel, and Lydia—whose smiles, hugs, and prayers are a constant source of encouragement to me as I pray for the next generation of believers to love the Lord and His Word with all their hearts and minds.

Finally, thank you to my heavenly Father, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit, who helps me in my weakness. To the triune God be the glory for what He has done through me, a broken vessel and a flawed instrument, yet one that is in the grip of His mighty and gracious hand.



# Introduction to This Study

It is my sincere hope that you are excited about studying Scripture, particularly the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is also my sincere desire that this study will help fuel your excitement. In this introduction I have provided three resources that I hope prove beneficial to you. First, I have provided an overview of how to use this Bible study. Feel free to adapt my suggestions to the context in which you will be using this study. I want this study to be a help to you, not a hindrance!

Second, I have provided an overview of the history of redemption and revelation. When we study Scripture, it is sometimes easy to get so focused on the original context that we forget to pull back and study a passage with regard to its redemptive-historical context (which considers the question of where the events of the passage are in salvation history). I hope this overview gives you a sense of the overarching story of Scripture.

Finally, I have provided an overview of what it means to study Christ in all of Scripture. Often, people struggle with how to teach the Old Testament in a Christ-centered way. Many times these books are taught in a legalistic or moralistic way, focusing more on what we are to do than on what Christ has already done for us. It is crucial we connect the passages to Christ first, so that we understand our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

## How to Use This Bible Study

This study is organized into four main parts:

(1) *Purpose*: This brief section introduces you to the passage you will be studying and is meant to guide you into how the lesson applies to your head (knowledge about God), your heart (affection for God), and your hands (service for God). Although it is brief, this is a significant section to read since it tells you in a nutshell what the lesson is all about, giving you the big picture before studying the finer details.

(2) *Personal Study*: This section of questions is meant to help you dig deeply into God's Word so that you might be equipped to worship God, work for His kingdom purposes, and witness for Him to a watching world. To assist you in your study, you may

want to have a good study Bible and concordance close at hand. I would encourage you not to get overwhelmed by the questions or think you have to answer every one of them, but to relax and enjoy the study of God's Word.

(3) *Putting It All Together*: This section is meant to help answer any lingering questions you may still have after your personal study time and assist you in tying things together from the lesson questions. It will prove helpful in cementing in your mind everything you've previously studied and will better prepare you to process things together with your Bible study group.

(4) *Processing It Together*: This section of questions is meant to help you study the Bible in the context of community, sharing what you have learned together so that you might sharpen one another, encourage one another, and pray for one another. Group leaders: Ideally, the women have worked through the previous three sections before coming together as a group. Your first gathering might be a time of fellowship and a discussion of the introduction to the book. Then you can assign the ladies the homework for the first lesson. Encourage them to read the purpose, work through the personal study questions, and read through "Putting It All Together." Remind them to relax and enjoy the study, encouraging them to come to the group time regardless of whether their homework is complete. You may want to star certain questions from your personal study that you want to cover in the group time, as well as highlight any sections from "Putting It All Together" to discuss. I would recommend reviewing the "Purpose" at the beginning of your group time as well. Don't forget to begin and end with prayer and to foster a warm and inviting environment where women can grow together in thinking biblically, being anchored in the truth, and living covenantally, being anchored in the covenant community.

Now that we have taken a look at how this study is organized, let's turn our attention to the big story of the Bible so that we might have a better grasp of the bigger context in which Ezra and Nehemiah fit.

### **An Overview of the History of Redemption and Revelation**

God has chosen to enter into a covenant relationship with His people. He is the covenant King; we are the covenant servants. As our covenant King, He acts in history, bringing about both His word and His works, and providentially ensures that the faith is passed from generation to generation. As His covenant servants, we are to obey His word.

It is only in Christ that the covenant King and the covenant servants meet. Christ is both the Lord of the covenant and the Servant of the covenant. He has come as Lord to extend grace and mercy to God's rebellious servants, and He has come as the Servant of the covenant to perfectly fulfill what God's people could never do, thus bringing blessing to all those who place their faith in Him.

Amazingly, our covenant King has chosen to dwell among His people. Throughout redemptive history we see a progression of God dwelling with His people. First,



we observe Him dwelling with Adam and Eve in the garden. Then we see Him meet with His people in the tabernacle and then the temple and dwell with them there. But the climax is when Jesus came to earth and tabernacled among us, fulfilling God's promise, "I will take you as My people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7). When Christ returns He will consummately fulfill this promise as we dwell with the triune God in the new heaven and the new earth forever (Rev. 21:3).

If we are to understand the overarching story of Scripture, we need to recognize the different covenants in the history of redemption: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. What theologians call the *covenant of redemption* is described in Ephesians 1:4, which teaches us that God the Father chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him." The Father has purposed our redemption, the Son has accomplished it, and the Holy Spirit applies it.

In Genesis 1–2 we learn of God's covenant with Adam before the fall. This covenant established a relationship between the Creator and the creature that involved *worship* (keeping the Sabbath day holy), *work* (ruling and multiplying), *woman* (marriage and procreation), and the *word of God* (God gave Adam a command when He put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. He could eat of any tree in the garden except one, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God told Adam that if he ate of that tree he would die; if he obeyed, he would live). Theologians refer to this prefall covenant with Adam as the *covenant of works*, the *covenant of life*, or the *covenant of creation*.

Tragically, Adam failed to obey, and all mankind fell with him in this first sin. But God sounds a note of grace in Genesis 3:15: death will not have the final word. God promises that He will put enmity between the serpent and the woman, between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. The woman's offspring would bruise the serpent's head, and the serpent would bruise His heel. This is the gospel in seed form. Ultimately, the woman's offspring is Christ. Christ defeated sin and death on the cross, triumphing over all His enemies.

Along with God's blessed promise to the woman that she would continue to produce *seed*, or offspring, the greatest of which is Christ, He also told her that she would experience the curse of *sorrow* with regard to children and the curse of *struggle* with regard to her husband.

God spoke a word to Adam also. He promised the man that he would receive the blessing of *sustenance*. But he would also experience the curse of *sweaty toil* and the *separation of soul and body* in death. Theologians call this postfall covenant the *covenant of grace*. Titus 3:4–7 provides a good summary of this covenant: "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should

become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” The covenant of grace includes God’s postfall covenant with Adam (Gen. 3:15), Noah (Gen. 6:17–22; 8:20–22; 9:1–17), Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–20; 17:1–2), Moses (Exodus 19–24 and Deuteronomy), and David (2 Samuel 7), as well as the new covenant, all of which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:31–34). Let’s take a closer look now at each of these covenants, as well as some other important events that were occurring in redemptive history, so that we have a better grasp of the story of salvation.

After the note of the gospel of grace is sounded to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, we learn of God’s covenant with Noah recorded in Genesis 9. The Lord promises that as long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will continue. This is amazing grace, for it promises that there will be an earth on which the history of salvation will unfold. Just think if there had been no day for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem or to die on the cross!

God’s covenant with Noah also promises that though the righteous will be saved, the wicked will be judged, a theme that is predominant all through Scripture. God’s original purposes of worship, work, and woman in the prefall covenant with Adam are renewed in the context of the history of redemption. God’s covenant with Noah can be summarized by the following: God’s *glorious grace* alongside His *glorious justice*, the *genealogical aspect* of the covenant (God will deal with families, not just individuals); the *goodness* of life; and the *general grace* extended to all mankind, including the universe. The sign of this covenant, the rainbow, is most appropriate, then, as it shines God’s grace in the midst of the cloudy storm of judgment.

In Genesis 12, 15, and 22, we learn of God’s covenant with Abraham, which is later renewed with Isaac and Jacob. First, God promises His *presence*. The crux of the covenant of grace can be summed up in one phrase, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). Second, God promises Abraham a *people*; God would make him a great nation. Third, God promises Abraham a *possession*; He would give His people the land of Canaan. Fourth, God promises Abraham that he has a bigger *purpose* than he could ever imagine. The nation that came through his seed was to point others to the Lord so that all the families of the earth would be blessed.

In Exodus, we learn of God’s covenant with Moses, the mediator of the law the Lord made with Israel, which can be summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This is the beginning of the theocratic nation of Israel.<sup>1</sup> God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt and into a relationship with Him as servants of the holy God. As such, they were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). We learn in both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 that if they were obedient, they would receive blessings (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14), but if they were disobedient, they would receive curses (Lev. 26:14–46; Deut. 28:15–68). One of these curses, the greatest, was exile from the land. But even toward the end of Deuteronomy, we see that God made provision

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1. By a theocratic nation, I mean that Israel’s earthly kings, priests, and prophets recognized God as the true King, and as such served to interpret and enforce His laws for the people.

for restoration after the exile, which involved the new covenant (Deut. 30:1–10; see also Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 37:21, 26).

In fact, Deuteronomy 28–30 is the “CliffsNotes” version of the rest of the Old Testament. First comes blessing, climaxing in the reign of King Solomon (1 Kings 8:24). Then come curses, ultimately resulting in exile from the land (2 Chron. 36:17–21). All the prophets refer to the covenant blessings and curses as they prophesy to Israel and Judah, giving them messages of judgment as well as holding out the hope of blessing. Though the prophets declare that exile is inevitable, they also declare God’s faithfulness to His covenant, keeping the promise of the new covenant before them (Deut. 30:1–10; Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 37:21, 26).

After Moses died, the Lord raised up Joshua to lead the people into the promised land, which was the place where God would dwell with His people in the temple. Up to this point in redemptive history, the garden of Eden and the tabernacle had been the places where the Lord had temporarily dwelt with His people. The entire book of Joshua centers on the entry into and conquest of the land.

But then Joshua died, and in the book of Judges we see that the people failed to conquer the land as they should have. Instead, they did what was right in their own eyes because there was no king in Israel. The books of Judges and Ruth anticipate the beginning of the monarchy in Israel with King Saul and King David.

In 2 Samuel 7, God makes a covenant with David concerning an eternal kingdom with an eternal Davidic king. First, God promises David a *position*, taking him from being a shepherd of sheep to making him a shepherd king over his people with a great name. Second, God promises David a *place*. Israel would be planted in their own place. Third, God promises David *peace*. In their own place, Israel would have rest from their enemies. Finally, God promises David *progeny*. The Lord would raise up David’s offspring and establish His kingdom forever.

The period of the monarchy climaxes in King Solomon, when the promises are fulfilled in Solomon’s prayer of dedication (1 Kings 8:24). Sadly, it didn’t take long (within Solomon’s reign) for the monarchy to take a turn for the worse (1 Kings 11). Following Solomon’s death, the country actually divided into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 931 BC (1 Kings 12:16–24).

Elijah and Elisha preached to the Northern Kingdom during this time. Although there were a few good kings, the majority of kings in both Israel and Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord and led the people into rebellion as well. In His grace and mercy, God raised up prophets during this time to prophesy to the people of coming judgment so that they would turn and repent of their wicked ways. Hosea and Amos preached to the Northern Kingdom, while Isaiah and Micah preached to the Southern Kingdom. Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah also preached their messages during this time. Tragically, the Northern Kingdom did not listen and was taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

A little over one hundred years later, the same thing happened to the Southern Kingdom, except it was the Babylonians who took them into captivity. This involved three different deportations in 605, 597, and 586 BC. In the second of these deportations, Jehoiachin, the last true Davidic king on the throne, was taken, along with the royal family and all the leading classes in Israel, to Babylon. God's promises seemed to be thwarted.

But again, in God's mercy, He raised up both Daniel and Ezekiel to prophesy to the people during the exile (Jeremiah was still prophesying during this time as well). Daniel and Ezekiel spoke messages of both judgment and restoration to the exiles. God would still be faithful to His covenant promise; He would be their God, and they would be His people. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke of the promised new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 37:21, 26), inaugurated by Christ during the last Passover, which was also the first Lord's Supper, with His disciples before His death.

The new covenant involved seven different promises. First, God promised His people would *return* to the land of promise. Second, God promised a *restoration of the land*. Third, God promised a *realization of each of His previous promises* to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Fourth, God promised a *renewed heart*. Fifth, God promised the *removal of sin*. Sixth, God promised a *reunion of Israel and Judah under one ruler*, Jesus Christ. Finally, God promised the *realization of redemption* (this was the final covenant, and as such, it secured redemption).

Following the exile, God raised up the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi to continue speaking to His people. Though there is a small fulfillment of a restored temple, people, and land under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, the promises of God could not be completely fulfilled until Jesus Christ came. As Paul so eloquently says, "All the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (2 Cor. 1:20).

The Gospels record for us the amazing truth of the incarnation. Jesus came to earth as a baby, lived a life of perfect obedience, died for the sins of God's people, was raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection, and ascended to the Father. Acts 2 records that the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost to renew the church and establish it by His power.

The new age was inaugurated through Christ and His church, but it awaits its consummation until Christ returns to bring the old age to a complete end with the final judgment and usher in the new heaven and the new earth. In the meantime, the church is to fulfill the Great Commission: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Matt. 28:18–20; see also Luke 24:47–49).

As we study any passage of Scripture, it is important for us to keep this overview of the history of redemption and revelation in mind. After studying the original context of the passage, we must ask the question, How does this text relate to the history of redemption? In other words, where is it in progressive, redemptive history? Then we must ask, How does this text relate to the climax of redemptive history—the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? The latter question leads us to the next section we need to consider in order to teach Christ in all of Scripture.

### **A Christ-Centered Interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah**

The story of Jesus begins in the Old Testament, in the opening chapters of Genesis, with the account of creation. As the apostle John so eloquently says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:1–5). Paul echoes this truth in Colossians 1:15–17: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.”

Matthew, like John, doesn’t begin his gospel account with the birth of Jesus; rather, he opens with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, reaching all the way back through the Old Testament to Abraham. In chapter 3 of his gospel, Luke goes back even further, tracing the story of Jesus all the way to Adam, the son of God. Paul too traces the story of Jesus back to Adam when he says, “And so it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). Even before the fall, the first man Adam pointed forward to the greater and final Adam, Jesus Christ. Luke closes his gospel with Jesus’s own account of His story, so since we are learning about Him from Him, we should pay close attention as we read His words in Luke 24.

Two disciples were trying to put the story of Jesus together. They had been in Jerusalem and witnessed the events at the end of Jesus’s life. They had seven long miles to try to figure it out as they journeyed from Jerusalem to Emmaus, but they couldn’t understand. They were deeply distressed. Their hope had been deflated. They thought that He was the one to redeem Israel, but instead He was crucified and buried. Indeed, the tomb was empty, but Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

Note carefully what Jesus says to them: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25–27).

Wouldn't you have liked to walk those seven miles with the three of them? It was the greatest walk those disciples would have in their entire lives as the Master Teacher told His own story, beginning in Genesis and moving all the way through the Prophets. It was the privilege of not only these two Emmaus disciples to hear Jesus tell His story but also the disciples who had been with Him during His earthly ministry. Luke tells us later in the same chapter that Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, everything written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. These things had to be fulfilled, and Jesus was telling them that He was the fulfillment (Luke 24:44–47).

He is the second Adam who did not sin but was obedient to death on the cross. He is the seed of the woman who crushed the serpent's head. He is the final Noah who saved His people through the cross. He is the final Abraham in whom all the families of the earth are blessed. He is the final Isaac who was sacrificed for our sin. He is the true Israel who was tested and tried in the wilderness and obeyed. He is the greater and final Moses who has been counted worthy of more honor since He is faithful over God's house as a son. He is the final judge who never did what was right in His own eyes or fell into sin but delivered His people by taking their judgment for them. He is the final prophet who suffered for His people and did so without opening His mouth in retaliation. He is the final priest who has offered Himself as the final sacrifice to atone for our sins. He is the final psalmist who leads His people in praise to God. He is the final Davidic king who reigns in perfect justice and righteousness. He is the final Solomon who is not only full of wisdom but is wisdom Himself (1 Cor. 1:30).

Peter is proof that Jesus opened His disciples' minds to understand that day, for in Acts 2 we read his sermon, which he begins by citing David's words in Psalm 16:8–11 and ends by citing his words in Psalm 110:1. He speaks these words in between:

Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. (Acts 2:29–33)

We cannot tell the story of Jesus in any way we please. We must learn from Jesus Himself and tell the story beginning with Genesis and Deuteronomy, moving through the Prophets and the Psalms, and then the New Testament Gospels and Letters, closing with Revelation, where the end of the story is told: "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). The

end of the story isn't really the end, for we will spend an eternity worshipping Him "who is and who was and who is to come,... Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth," the One who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and "has made us kings and priests to His God and Father" (Rev. 1:4–6).

We have looked at some key texts, so now let's look at some key phrases for identifying the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. We might say that we go from Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment, or from Old Testament problem (sinners in need of a Savior) to New Testament solution (the Savior comes), or from Old Testament anticipation to New Testament realization, but not just a realization—a far-surpassing realization. For example, Jesus Christ is not just a greater Moses, Samson, prophet, priest, or king, but the greatest and final Moses, Samson, prophet, priest, and king. Furthermore, the Lord of history designs historical persons, offices, institutions, and events to foreshadow the full redemption to come. Thus, He foreshadows His great work of redemption in both words and works (events).<sup>2</sup>

The climax in all of Scripture is the gospel—the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. All the Old Testament writers look toward this climax. All the New Testament writers look both back to this climax and forward to the consummation of the kingdom, Christ's second coming, which was inaugurated at His first coming. There are really four main questions, then, when we are studying Scripture: (1) What is the original context of this passage? (2) Where are we in the history of redemption in this text? (3) How does this text relate to the gospel? (4) How do I apply this text to my life right now in light of where I am in redemptive history?

These questions keep us from a legalistic reading of the text ("Do this, and you will live"), a moralistic reading of the text ("Be a good person, and you will be saved"), a therapeutic reading of the text ("I'm good, you're good, God is good, everything is okay"), and an allegorical reading of the text ("I'm going to make this text refer to Christ no matter what interpretive principles I have to break!"). Instead, we will be women who glean a Christ-centered message.

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2. Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2007), 225–26.







# Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah

When the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are mentioned, we usually think of the men who bear those names, and often we think of them as great leaders, which is certainly true. But the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about more than two men. They are about fifty thousand of God's people who returned to Jerusalem and Judah under foreign leadership and found themselves in slavery. Yet God did not forsake them; He extended His covenant love to them and put His hand upon them for their good and the good of the whole world. As the closing story line of the Old Testament period (chronologically speaking), these books prepare us perfectly for a statement Jesus made at the beginning of His ministry:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD. (Luke 4:18–19)

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah end on a note that begs a truer and final Reformer than Ezra and Nehemiah could ever be—it paves the way for Jesus of Nazareth to step onto the pages of the New Testament. He is the true temple, the living Word, and the One who is preparing a city where the walls are perfectly pure and secure.

## **The Author, Date, and Historical Background of Ezra and Nehemiah**

The divine author of Scripture is God Himself: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in

righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But the Holy Spirit used human authors to speak and write the word of God (2 Peter 1:21).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah span about one hundred years’ worth of Israel’s history, from the time of Cyrus’s edict in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland of Jerusalem and Judah, to the time of Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem in 433–432 BC. Events cluster around two main periods within this hundred-year span—538–515 BC (Ezra 1–6) and 458–433 BC (Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13). The former of these periods centers on the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and Jeshua’s leadership. The latter period centers on the reformation of the people by way of the law under Ezra’s leadership and the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah’s leadership.

As you read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it will become clear that some parts are written in the third person and other parts are written in the first person by Ezra or Nehemiah. There are historical narrative, genealogies, and letters to kings, as well as what appear to be personal journals of Ezra and Nehemiah. So it is difficult to ascertain exactly who the author of Ezra-Nehemiah is and when he wrote the book, but it is likely that whoever the author was, he compiled his sources and wrote the book around 400 BC.<sup>1</sup>

In order to continue moving the covenant story forward and to prepare for the arrival of the Promised One of the New Testament, God raised up the Persians to conquer the Babylonians and reign for approximately two hundred years before they would be conquered by the Greeks. During the Persian period, the Lord providentially ensured that a remnant of His people, about fifty thousand (Ezra 2:64–65), would be allowed to return to Jerusalem and Judah and freely practice their religion. As we will see, their time in Jerusalem wasn’t completely free of opposition, but nonetheless Israel was in the right place at the right time to rebuild the temple, be reformed by the law, and rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.

### **The Purpose of Ezra and Nehemiah**

The overarching purpose of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah was to confirm God’s covenant promises and prophetic word (Gen. 12:1–3; Neh. 1:7; Isa. 40:1–11; Jer. 25:11), convict God’s people of their sin (Ezra 9:6–7; Neh. 9:32–37), and comfort God’s people by providentially bringing His purposes to pass (Ezra 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:8, 18, 20). The story line also centers on three things—the temple, the law of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem. God’s presence, protection, and promises permeate all three of these, and so it is not surprising that by the end of the book we see all three come together at the

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1. It wasn’t until the Middle Ages that Ezra-Nehemiah became two books in the Hebrew Bibles, so it is likely that the author is the same for both books, and perhaps he compiled the sources and put the book together shortly after the final events of Nehemiah in 433 BC. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 204–5.

dedication of the wall, when Ezra and Nehemiah lead two different choirs in opposite directions along the wall to meet in the temple, and when Nehemiah has the priests guard the gates of the city on the Sabbath to keep it holy (Neh. 12:40; 13:22).

The purpose of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah becomes even clearer when we take a look at some key verses from each of the books, both of which occur in the middle of prayers:

And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. (Ezra 9:8–9)

Here we are, servants today!  
And the land that You gave to our fathers,  
To eat its fruit and its bounty,  
Here we are, servants in it!  
And it yields much increase to the kings  
You have set over us,  
Because of our sins;  
Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle  
At their pleasure;  
And we are in great distress. (Neh. 9:36–37)

### **An Outline of Ezra and Nehemiah**

Different and detailed outlines of Ezra and Nehemiah can be found in commentaries, but for this Bible study, I suggest the following:

- Return of Exiles (Ezra 1–2)
- Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 3–6)
- Return and Reforms of Ezra (Ezra 7–8)
- Repentance over Foreign Marriages (Ezra 9–10)
  
- Return of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1–2)
- Rebuilding of the Wall (Nehemiah 3:1–7:4)
- Record of Returned Exiles (Nehemiah 7:5–73)
- Reading of the Law and Renewal of Covenant (Nehemiah 8–10)

- Rejoicing in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1–13:3)
- Reforms of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:4–31)

Each lesson will further divide this broad outline into smaller parts, but for now, note these major divisions as you prepare to study Ezra and Nehemiah.

Perhaps today you need the Lord God to brighten your eyes and grant a little revival in your slavery. Maybe you are enslaved to anger, beauty, drugs, fitness, sexual sin, or something else. I hope and pray you will appreciate in a deeper and more profound way as you study these books that Jesus came to set you free. As the true temple, the living Word, and the One who is preparing a city where the walls are perfectly pure and secure, He invites you to fix your eyes on Him so that your heart might be revived.