

# **GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE**

## **A STUDY OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH**

“O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned” (Nehemiah 1:5-6).

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## SCHEDULE

September 6 - October 18, 2020

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Lesson 4	Temple rebuilding resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6)	8	Wed, Sept 16
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Lesson 6	Trembling at God's word: Confession, and repentance (Ezra 9-10)	10	Wed, Sept 23
Lesson 7	A third return by God's good hand (Nehemiah 1-2)	11	Sun, Sept 27
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## Lesson 1

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

#### Nehemiah and Ezra and Their Place in the Story of God's People

For centuries, Ezra and Nehemiah were passed down as one book (Ezra-Nehemiah). They represent the close of Old Testament history.

The history God's people in the Old Testament began with his promise to Abraham that his seed would grow into a great nation (Gen. 12:1-7). After a long sojourn of his descendants in Egypt, Moses delivered them and the Lord gave his law and made his covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. Following 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel possessed the land God promised. The nation first was ruled by a series of judges, but eventually was given a king (Saul) to rule over them. The kingdom divided (northern Israel and southern Judah) following the death of Solomon, David's son and Israel's third king.

Throughout their history the people went through periods of unfaithfulness to the Lord and the covenant. God sent prophets to deliver his message warning of judgment and calling for repentance. Because of their unfaithfulness, God allowed the northern kingdom to be conquered by the Assyrians (722 BC), and the southern kingdom by the Babylonians (586 BC). In both cases, the people were taken as exiles into foreign lands.

When Cyrus king of Persia overthrew the Babylonians, he issued a decree (538 BC) allowing the exiled Jews to return to their land. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the restoration of God's covenant people according to his word, as under Persian rule they were allowed to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem.

#### The Times of Ezra and Nehemiah

Together these two books cover events that span a little over a hundred years, from 538 to 433 BC. The story involves three different waves of returning exiles from Babylonia:

- In 538 BC, Cyrus sent the **first wave** of exiles home to rebuild their temple, under the leadership of Zerubbabel (with Jeshua the high priest and later the prophets Haggai and Zechariah). This continued from 538 to 516 BC (recounted in Ezra 1-6).
- The **second wave** occurred in 458 BC, led by Ezra, who was given the task of teaching the people the Law of Moses and calling them to obey it (Ezra 7-10).
- In 445 BC, Nehemiah and a **third group** of exiles returned to Jerusalem, where he led them to rebuild the walls of the city in the face of opposition (Neh. 1-6). He then joined with Ezra to instruct the people further and to restore them as God's holy nation and followers of his word (Neh. 7-13).

The events of Esther occurred in this period in Persia, beginning in the third year of Ahasuerus or Xerxes (483 BC).

Prophets of the period include Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy in 520 BC, exhorting the leaders of the Jews to take up the task of rebuilding the temple, which had been neglected in the years after Zerubbabel led the first wave of exiles (Hag. 1:2; Ezra

5:1-2; Zech. 4:9-10; 8:9). They also prophesied of the Messiah (Hag. 2:9; Zech. 3:8). Malachi probably ministered during the time of Nehemiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah include first-person narratives. Both were probably finished soon after the events recorded in Nehemiah, in approximately 430 BC.

### **Persian Rulers of the period**

- **Cyrus the Great** (r. 549-530 BC) - overthrew the Babylonians and issued a decree (538 BC) allowing the exiled Jews to return to their land and restore the worship of their God
- **Cambyses** (r. 530-522 BC) - added Egypt to his dominions
- **Darius I** (r. 521-486 BC) - Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy in 520 BC, and work on the temple resumed (Ezra 5-6)
- **Xerxes I** or **Ahasuerus** (r. 486-465/4 BC) - mentioned in Ezra 4:6; dominates the book of Esther
- **Artaxerxes I** (r. 464-423 BC) - ruler during the events of Neh. 7-13; Malachi prophesied
- **Darius II** the Persian (r. 423-404 BC) - mentioned in Neh. 12:22

### **Outline of Ezra**

- I. Cyrus' decree and the first return of exiles from Babylon (Ezra 1-2)
- II. The returned exiles rebuild the temple on its original site (Ezra 3-6)
- III. Ezra the priest leads the second return to teach the law of Moses (Ezra 7-8)
- IV. Ezra discovers and confronts the problem of intermarriage (Ezra 9-10)

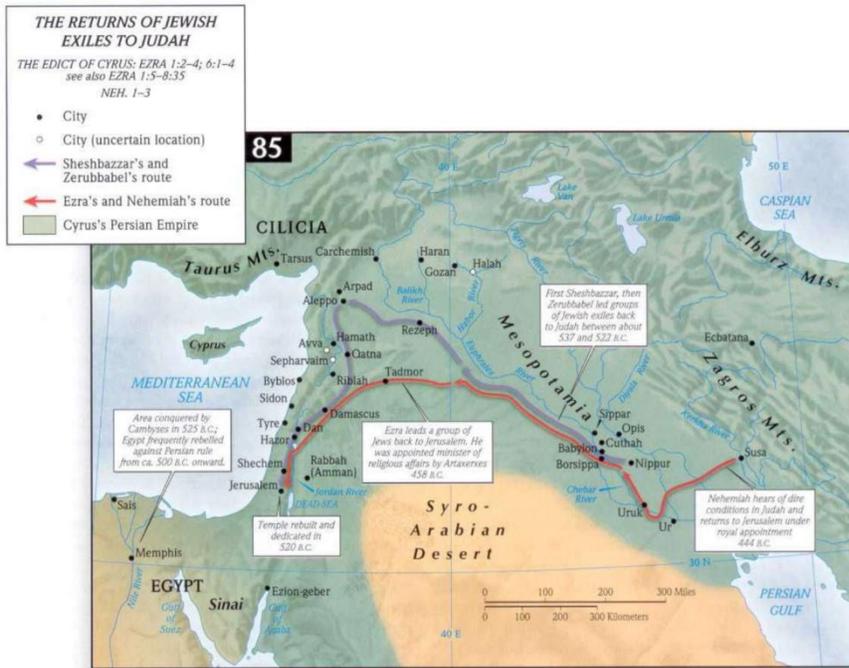
### **Outline of Nehemiah**

- I. Nehemiah leads the third return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (Neh. 1-2)
- II. The wall is rebuilt, despite opposition (Neh. 3:1-7:4)
- III. A record of those who returned from exile (Neh. 7:4-73)
- IV. The people are instructed in the law and the covenant is renewed (Neh. 8-10)
- V. Results of covenant renewal (Neh. 11-12)
- VI. Nehemiah deals with ongoing challenges (Neh. 13)

### **Themes in Ezra and Nehemiah**

- God's sovereignty, steadfast love, and faithfulness to his covenant (Ezra 1:2; Neh. 1:5-6)
- The remnant of God's people as his holy seed, and the need for faithfulness and holiness (Ezra 9:2, 8-15)
- Emphasis on worship, prayer, and faithfulness to Scripture (Ezra 3:3, 10-13; 9:5-15; Neh. 1:4-11; 8:1-9; 9:1-38; 12:27-47)
- Anticipation of the promised Messiah (Ezra 9:8-9; Neh. 9:36-37)

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## Lesson 2

### **CYRUS' DECREE AND THE FIRST RETURN OF EXILES FROM BABYLON (Ezra 1-2)**

Ezra's narrative begins with king Cyrus issuing his decree releasing God's people from exile to return home to Judah and Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The king provides gifts and provisions for the journey and stolen treasures from the temple are restored. God acts on behalf of his people as he promised.

#### **Cyrus' proclamation (1:1-4)**

1. How does 2 Chronicles 36 relate to the opening of Ezra?
2. What predictions did Isaiah and Jeremiah make about these events? (Isa. 44:24-45:7; Jer. 25:11-14)
3. What does God's "stirring up the spirit" of Cyrus and the people show about God's purposes?

#### **Vessels of the temple restored (1:5-11)**

4. What did the temple represent for God's people? (1 Kings 7:51-8:11)
5. How has Christ fulfilled God's purpose for the tabernacle/temple? (John 1:14; Eph. 2:19-22)

#### **Numbering of the people (2:1-70)**

6. Who were Zerubbabel and Jeshua (2:2; cf. Hag. 1)
7. What does God's numbering of the people show about God's faithful preservation of a remnant (1:4; see Isa. 10:20-22)
8. Who are God's remnant now? (Gal. 3:26-29; 1 Pet. 2:9-10)
9. How does Ezra 2 demonstrate the importance of the temple, the Levites, and the priests? (Num. 3:1-20)

## Lesson 3

### REBUILDING THE TEMPLE AND OPPOSITION (Ezra 3-4)

Having completed their journey, the returned exiles begin work on the temple. They rebuild the altar and temple foundation, and focus on worshipping God. Opposition to the work from adversaries delays the work.

#### Rebuilding the altar (3:1-7)

1. What was the people's guide as they engaged in this work?
2. Why was the altar so important for the Israelites? (Exod. 29:38-46)
3. What kind of altar do Christians have? (Heb. 10:1-25; 13:9-15)

#### Rebuilding the temple foundation (3:8-13)

4. Why were the people praising and giving thanks to God?
5. What caused them to sing of God's unchanging character, his "steadfast love"?
6. Why was their joy accompanied by weeping? (3:12-15; cf. 1 Kings 8:1-11)

#### Ongoing opposition to the work (4:1-24)

7. Note the following chronological sections:
  - a. Ezra 4:1-5 - opposition to the first group of returned exiles under Zerubbabel (beginning in 538 BC during the reign of Cyrus)
  - b. Ezra 4:6 - oppression during the reign of Ahasuerus (r. 486-464 BC, the time of Esther)
  - c. Ezra 4:7-23 - opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes I (r.464-423 BC, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah)
  - d. Ezra 4:24 - from the time of Cyrus and Zerubbabel (4:5) to the reign of Darius (whose second year was 520 BC)
8. In what ways were adversaries trying to hinder the work of God and God's people throughout this period?
9. In what various ways did the people deal with the adversaries around them?
10. What does the New Testament teach about disciples of Christ as we face opposition? (John 15:18-20; Eph. 6:10-13)

## Lesson 4

### TEMPLE REBUILDING RESUMED AND COMPLETED (Ezra 5-6)

Work on the temple is resumed and completed. The dedication of the temple and a joyful celebration of the worship show the importance of worship for God's people. God's sovereign hand made all of this possible according to his word for his redemptive purposes.

#### Temple work resumed (5:1-5)

1. How was God urging his people back to the task of rebuilding? (5:1-2; see also Hag. 1 and Zech. 1:1-7; 4:1-10)
2. What leaders God did provide, and what were their respective roles?
3. What question was asked by Tattenai the governor, and why did he ask it?

#### Letter sent to Darius the king (5:6-17)

4. How does the letter from the local officials to Darius refer to God and God's people?
5. What did it say the elders of the people claim?
6. Who was Sheshbazzar?

#### Darius finds Cyrus' decree (6:1-12)

7. What did Darius order to be done? (6:1)
8. What were the requirements of Darius' decree after they found Cyrus' original decree? (6:2-12)
9. How does Darius refer to God and the temple (6:12; cf. Deut. 12:1-11; 1 Kings 8:27-30)

#### Temple completed and dedicated (6:13-22)

10. What were the various levels of authority that worked to bring the temple work to a successful completion? (6:13-15)
11. What was the significance of the dedication of the temple? (6:16-18; see 1 Kings 8:62-66)
12. What was the purpose of the sin offering? (6:17) What had the people confessed in 5:11-12?
13. What did the Feast of Passover commemorate, and why would it be so meaningful at this time? (6:19-22; Exod. 12:1-20)

## Lesson 5

### A SECOND RETURN BY GOD'S GOOD HAND (Ezra 7-8)

Under king Artaxerxes, a second group returns from exile, led by Ezra the scribe. Ezra's focus is to rebuild spiritually by teaching the laws of God. God's sovereign hand directed the king and prospered the remnant.

#### **Ezra the scribe (7:1-10)**

1. Who was king of Persia at the time of the events recorded in this section?
2. List the important things we learn about Ezra in these verses.
3. What was his attitude toward the law of the Lord?
4. What do these verses tell us about God, and how important is this perspective in the story?

#### **Ezra and king Artaxerxes (7:11-28)**

5. How do these events compare with those recorded in chapter 1?
6. What does the king send Ezra to do? What were the king's motives?
7. What was Ezra's response to these provisions? (7:27-28)

#### **The return of the second group of exiles (8:1-36)**

8. How does this section compare with chapter 2?
9. What did Ezra discover when they camped by the river of Ahava? (8:15)
10. How is this issue addressed? (8:16-20)
11. What principle of faith does Ezra hold to in Ezra 8:21-23?
12. What does Ezra 8:24-34 show about the kind of faith required for the journey?
13. What did the people do after they arrived in Jerusalem? (8:35-36)
14. What do these two chapters demonstrate about the sovereignty of God?

## Lesson 6

### TREMBLING AT GOD'S WORD:

#### THE PROBLEM OF INTERMARRIAGE, CONFESSION, AND REPENTANCE (Ezra 9-10)

Ezra ends with Ezra leading the people in repentance before the Lord for their disobedience to his laws concerning intermarriage with unbelieving people of surrounding nations. The people make reparations because they tremble before God and his holy word.

#### Ezra's prayer (9:1-15)

1. What was the nature of the sin revealed in Ezra 9:1-2? (cf. Deut. 7:1-11)
2. What was the effect of this revelation on Ezra and the people? (9:3-4)
3. What is implied by the reference to trembling at God's word? (9:4; 10:3; Isa. 66:1-2)
4. What key word and phrases are found in Ezra's prayer? (9:6-15)
5. What does it say about God, God's people, and the guilt of sin?
6. What had God done "for a brief moment"?
7. Ezra spoke of the "holy seed" of Israel (9:2). How does this relate to the promise to Abraham?
8. How is the promise of Abraham's seed fulfilled now? (Gal. 3:16, 29)

#### The people repent (10:1-44)

9. How did the people respond after Ezra prayed? (10:1-4)
10. What did Ezra and the leaders call upon the people to do? (10:5-15)
11. What does this circumstance and their response to it teach us about God's call for the people to be holy? (1 Pet. 1:14-16)

## Lesson 7

### A THIRD RETURN BY GOD'S GOOD HAND (Nehemiah 1-2)

Nehemiah begins 13 years after Ezra led the second group back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah, cupbearer to king Artaxerxes, weeps for Jerusalem, prays to the Lord for help, approaches the king, and leads a third group home to rebuild the broken-down walls of Jerusalem. God's sovereign hand works to raise up Nehemiah and preserve his remnant.

#### **Nehemiah weeps and prays for Jerusalem (1:1-11)**

1. What report did Nehemiah receive concerning the remnant of the Jews in Jerusalem? (1:1-3; cf. Ezra 4:7-23)
2. What kind of man was Nehemiah? (1:2-4)
3. What is the essence of Nehemiah's prayer? (1:4-11)
4. What was Nehemiah's view of God?

#### **Nehemiah speaks to the king (2:1-8)**

5. Why was Nehemiah able to speak to the king? (1:11-2:1)
6. What did the king observe about Nehemiah? (2:2)
7. What requests did Nehemiah make? (2:3-8)
8. How had Nehemiah prepared for this moment?
9. How does Nehemiah indicate who was responsible for the king's favor?

#### **Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem (2:9-20)**

10. What was the purpose of Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem?
11. What was Nehemiah's strategy when he first went to Jerusalem? (2:11-16)
12. What was his message and appeal to the people when he spoke to them? (2:17-18)
13. What was their reaction?
14. Who were Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem? (2:10, 19)
15. What was Nehemiah's answer to them? (2:20; cf. Ezra 4:1-3)

## Lesson 8

### REBUILDING THE WALL AND OPPOSITION (Nehemiah 3-4)

Nehemiah leads the work of rebuilding the temple through effective leadership and trusting in the Lord. The people are united in their efforts in spite of opposition.

#### **The people work together (ch. 3)**

1. How were the people organized in the work?
2. What does this teach about unity?
3. What lessons does this demonstrate for us as God's people in the church? (1 Cor. 12:12-31)

#### **Opposition and threats (ch. 4)**

4. What kinds of threats did Sanballat and Tobiah make? (4:1-3)
5. What were these words intended to do?
6. How did the Jews respond? (4:4-6)
7. How did the threats of their enemies escalate? (4:7-8)
8. In what ways did Nehemiah and the people respond to these threats?
9. How does this illustrate the harmonious connection between faith and works? (4:20-21; compare Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 2:12-13; Col. 1:29; Jas. 2:14-26)

## Lesson 9

### COMPLETION OF THE REBUILDING OF THE WALL (Nehemiah 5-6)

The people complete the rebuilding of the wall in spite of opposition from adversaries and internal strife. Through faith in the help of God, the wall is completed.

#### Internal threats (ch. 5)

1. What was the issue that arose in Neh. 5:1-13, and how was it hindering the work? (see Deut. 15:12-15 and 24:10-15)
2. In what ways did Nehemiah respond?
3. How did Nehemiah offer himself as an example? (5:14-19)

#### Enemies plot against Nehemiah (ch. 6)

4. Describe the plot against Nehemiah by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. (6:1-9)
5. How did Nehemiah respond to their calls for a meeting?
6. Who were Shemaiah and Noadiah, and what did they try to get Nehemiah to do? (6:10-14)
7. When was the wall completed? (6:15)
8. What effect did this have on their enemies?
9. What do we see Nehemiah constantly and regularly doing that shows his faith in God? (1:4; 2:4; 4:4-5; 4:9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; compare 1 Thess. 5:17)

## Lesson 10

### **BUILDING UP THE PEOPLE, ENROLLMENT, AND INSTRUCTION IN THE LAW (Nehemiah 7-8)**

The people of God are enrolled according genealogical records. They are taught the word of God and seek to practice what they learn by observing the feast of tabernacles with great rejoicing.

#### **The people organized and enrolled (ch. 7)**

1. How does Nehemiah seek to deal with the challenges involving in reestablishing the city? (7:1-4)
2. How important was the city of Jerusalem to God's people? (Ps. 48)
3. How does this chapter compare with Ezra 2?

#### **Reading the law to the people (8:1-12)**

4. What important attitudes are evident among the people when they gather to hear the reading of the law? (8:1-6)
5. What role did the Levites play? (8:7-8)
6. What does this show about how God reveals his will to man?
7. What was the people's reaction to what they heard? (8:9-12)

#### **Observance of a feast (8:13-18)**

8. What happened on the second day?
9. What did they find written in the law? (8:14; cf. Lev. 23:33-43)
10. How did the people respond to this discovery?
11. What does this demonstrate about the power of the word of God? (cf. 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Heb. 4:12)

## Lesson 11

### THE PEOPLE CONFESS THEIR SINS (Nehemiah 9-10)

Based on reading and teaching of the law, the people are convicted. They confess their sin as revealed in their history and renew their covenant promises.

#### A prayer of confession of sin (ch. 9)

1. List all the things God's people did to prepare themselves as they gathered for prayer. (9:1-5)
2. What blessings did the law provide? (9:3, 13; cf. Ps. 19:7-11)
3. This prayer (the longest in the Bible) consists of the following sections:
  - a. Praise to his name (9:5)
  - b. God the creator (9:6)
  - c. He chose Abram and made promises (9:7-8)
  - d. He delivered them from Egypt and brought them to Mt. Sinai (9:9-15)
  - e. He showed compassion when they became stubborn and when they made the golden calf (9:16-19)
  - f. He guided and provided for them in the wilderness (9:20-21)
  - g. He gave them the promised land (9:22-25)
  - h. He showed compassion each time they disobeyed in the days of the judges (9:26-29)
  - i. He bore with them and admonished them through the prophets (9:30-31)
  - j. He was just in allowing them to go into captivity (9:32-37)
4. How does each sentence in verses 6-15 begin?
5. What does the prayer reveal about the character of God and his dealings with his people?
6. Why did the people make a covenant? (9:38)

#### Obligations of the covenant (ch. 10)

7. What specific parts of the law do the people focus on in this written covenant? (10:30-39)
8. What kind of history had the people had with keeping covenants? (9:17)
9. What aspect of God's character stand out here? (cf. Exod. 34:1-9)

## Lesson 12

### DEDICATION OF THE WALL WITH CELEBRATION AND THANKSGIVING (Nehemiah 11-12)

The people of God repopulate the city of Jerusalem. The completed wall is dedicated as the people worship God. The worship of the temple is reinstated.

#### **God's people come to Jerusalem (11:1-12:26)**

1. How is Jerusalem described, and why? (11:1)
2. Why was it important to repopulate the city?
3. Who are some of the specific people or groups identified in the listing of people who came to live in the city?
4. What is the significance of Jerusalem in Scripture? (Isa. 26:1-3; Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 21)

#### **The wall is dedicated (12:27-43)**

5. What preparations for the dedication ceremony were made? (12:27-30; Exod. 19:10-15)
6. How would you characterize the people's hearts as they worshipped? (12:27-43)
7. How does Neh. 12:43 compare to Ezra 3:13?
8. What kind of statement would their expressions of joy make to the surrounding peoples?

#### **The temple service reinstated (12:44-47)**

9. Why was it important to place men in charge of the contributions and tithes?
10. Why was it important to support the priests and Levites?

## Lesson 13

### CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS IN THE COMMUNITY (Nehemiah 13)

Nehemiah deals with a series of sinful practices, such as intermarriage, that threaten the holiness and purity of the remnant of God's people.

#### Ongoing problems and threats to the holiness of God's people (ch. 13)

1. Why were the foreigners excluded from Israel? (13:1-3)
2. What had Eliashib the priest done for Tobiah, and why? (13:4-5)
3. What did Nehemiah do when he learned of this evil? (13:6-9)
4. What failure regarding the Levites did Nehemiah learn about? (13:10)
5. How was this corrected? (13:11-14)
6. How did Nehemiah deal with violations of the Sabbath? (13:15-22)
7. What did Nehemiah do about mixed marriages? (13:23-28)

#### Concluding thoughts

8. What do we continue to see Nehemiah doing regularly? (13:14, 22, 29)
9. Why does Nehemiah end in this way? How is it similar to Ezra's ending? What do they show us about the people?
10. What do Ezra and Nehemiah show us about God? (Ezra 9:8-9; Neh. 9:32)
11. What promises of God are yet unfulfilled when the Old Testament story closes?