

**EZRA and NEHEMIAH**  
**Introduction and Background**  
**Lesson 1**

**I. Setting of Ezra and Nehemiah**

The nation of Israel had been taken captive by the Assyrians and had disappeared as a people (II Kings 17:1-18) and left Judah alone. The nation of Judah did not learn from Israel and fell to the Babylonians (Jer. 52:1-16). Jerusalem was destroyed, including the temple and the wall, and only the poorest of the people were left in the land. It would be seventy years before God would restore the people to their land (Jer. 25:8-11). There were actually three groups that returned – one under Zerubbabel which rebuild the temple, a group with Ezra (whose charge was to restore the law of Moses), and a group with Nehemiah who rebuild the walls of the city. The story of Ezra and Nehemiah takes place over a hundred years – from when Cyrus gives the Jews permission to go home and rebuild their temple until Nehemiah is in his second term as governor of Judah. Ezra starts with the city of Jerusalem in ruins and largely unpopulated, but by the end of Nehemiah the temple and walls have been built, the worship of Jehovah has been reestablished, and the Jews have separated themselves from the evil nations around them.

**II. Things to look for as you study the books:**

- A. The three major events of the books (in order)
  - 1. Rebuild the temple
    - a. The people set up an altar soon after they arrived (Ezra 3:2-3)
    - b. Temple was ignored until it was a disgrace (Hag. 1:4, Zech. 4:9)
  - 2. Restore the law
    - a. Ezra's purpose (Ezra 7:10)
    - b. Law – something to be respected (“tremble at the command...”) Ezra 10:3
    - c. Law was something that the people needed to understand. Teachers were provided (Neh. 8:7-8)
  - 3. Rebuild the wall – a study in leadership
    - a. Overcoming difficulties from your supervisor, your own people, and powerful external enemies. Regarding the external enemies Nehemiah faced – historical documents tell us that Sanballat was at some point the governor of Samaria, Gesham was a leader of a powerful group of Arab communities, and Tobiah was probably the governor of Ammon and a member of an influential Jewish family.
    - b. The wall was more than protection from enemies – it represented the separation of the Jews from the rest of the world. Nehemiah uses the wall to defend the Sabbath from violation (Neh. 13:15-22)

## B. God's People

1. Only a remnant is saved (Ezra 9:15) – 50,000 return (Ezra 2:64-65)
2. God's love for His people
  - a. God saved His people (Ezra 9:8)
  - b. God's providence in working out the events of the book:
    1. "Jehovah stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1)
    2. "Jehovah...hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart..." (Ezra 7:27)
    3. God stirred up the spirit of those who volunteered to go (Ezra 1:5)
    4. God put into Nehemiah's heart to rebuild the wall (Neh. 2:12)

## C. Prayer

1. Content of prayer (Ezra 9, Neh. 9)
2. Frequency of prayer
3. Length of prayer (Compare Neh. 9 with Neh. 2:4-5)
4. Occasion of prayer

## III. Outline of Ezra (Adapted from Guthrie)

1. 1:1-2:70 – Return from Exile
2. 3:1-4:5 – The work of restoration begins
3. 4:6-23 – List of opposition to Jewish building programs
4. 4:24-6:22 – The temple is completed (Approximately a 60 year gap)
5. 7:1-8:36 – Ezra's return to Jerusalem
6. 9:1-10:44 – The problem of mixed marriages

## IV. Outline of Nehemiah (from Guthrie)

1. 1:1-2:11 – Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem
2. 2:12-3:32 – The building of the wall commenced
3. 4:1-7:4 – The wall completed in spite of opposition
4. 7:5-13:3 – Other events during Nehemiah's first term of office
5. 13:4-31 – Nehemiah's second term of office

## V. Significant dates to remember

- 721 BC – Israel goes into Assyrian captivity and loses its identity as a nation
- 606 BC – First group of captives taken from Judah to Babylon
- 597 BC – Capture of the city of Jerusalem to Babylon - Second group of captives taken
- 586 BC - Destruction of Jerusalem - Third group of captives taken
- 539 BC – Babylon falls to the Medes and Persians
- 536 BC – First group of captives returns under Zerubbabel
- 520-516 BC – The temple is rebuilt
- 458 BC – A second group of captives returns under Ezra
- 444 BC – The wall around Jerusalem is rebuilt by Nehemiah

## VI. Persian kings during the period of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah

1. Cyrus (559-530 BC) – Founder of the Persian Empire. In 539 BC Babylon fell to him without a struggle. His policy included returning people and their gods back to their homelands, thus fulfilling Isaiah 44:28, 45:1ff. The “Cyrus Cylinder”, a record of some of the Persian policies reads as follows:

“I returned to these sacred cities..., the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations...

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me..., to Marduk, my lord, may they say this: “Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son...”

2. Cambyses (530-522 BC)
3. Darius I (522-486 BC) – The first several years of his reign, he spent putting down revolts. This was 520, when Haggai and Zechariah began prophesying, and in which year the work on the temple was resumed (see Ezra 5 and 6). The Persian empire reached the height of its power during the reign of Darius.
4. Xerxes I (also called Ahasuerus 486-465 BC) – He is mentioned in passing in Ezra 4:6. He was the king of Persia during the time of Esther.
5. Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC) – Persian king whose reign encompasses Ezra 7 to the end of the book and the entire book of Nehemiah. In the early years of his reign, there was a revolt in Egypt, so Ezra’s trip to nearby Judah in 458 BC could have been politically useful to him. Several years later (449 BC) his own governor of Syria revolted. The king’s sensitivity to unrest in the region can be seen in his response to accusations that the Jews might also try to revolt (Ezra 4:7ff). He recognized a man he could trust, however, in Nehemiah and appointed him governor of Judah in 445.
6. Xerxes II (424-423 BC)
7. Darius II (423-404 BC) – Last Persian king mentioned by Nehemiah (Neh. 12:22)

VII. Things that you should be able to do when you have completed this class:

1. Be able to give dates to the events in item V.
2. Be able to list the three major events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.
3. Be able to discuss the leadership styles of Ezra and Nehemiah and what characterizes an effective leader.
4. Be able to list the kings of the Persian empire and their accomplishments.

VIII. Bibliography

1. Ezra & Nehemiah, An Introduction and Commentary by Derek Kidner (Part of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)
2. The New Bible Commentary, Revised – Ezra and Nehemiah by D.Guthrie, J.Motyer, A.Stibbs, D.Wiseman
3. Hand Me Another Brick by Charles Swindoll