

The Message of the Old Testament

A Book-by-Book Study

Ezra

Background and Introduction

Originally, in the Hebrew canon, Ezra was combined with Nehemiah as one book. They were divided in the Christian Bible around the end of the fourth century A.D. because of the main characters who carry the story line in each. Together, the two books cover about one _____ of history---from 539 to 433 B.C.

The book of Ezra describes a first wave of exiles who return to Judah under King Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple in the years 539-516 B.C., as well as a second wave who return with Ezra more than fifty years later (around 458). Nehemiah, whom we will look at [later], rebuilds the walls a little more than ten years later (445-433 B.C.). Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 389.

The Jews were exiled in 586 B.C. when the Babylonian empire crushed Jerusalem, tearing down the walls and carrying tens of thousands of Jews away to Babylon.

- ▶ Approximately 50 years pass
- ▶ Babylonian empire crumbles
- ▶ Persian empire emerges
- ▶ Cyrus ascends the throne

Outline

- I. First Exiles Return (1-2)
- II. The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple (3-6)
- III. Ezra Returns (7-8)
- IV. The People Relapse and Repent (9-10)

The Message

The First Exiles Return

1:1-4 —

1:5-7 —

The remainder of chapters 1-2 identify

- ▶ Articles returned to the Jews
- ▶ The leaders and families that returned

The returnees included priests, Levites, and temple servants.

Sacrifices were re-instituted

3:1-3

3:8-11

Rebuilding the Temple – emotions ran high

3:12-13

Facing Opposition

4:4-5

Parenthesis illustrating opposition

4:6-23 - - Letters were written by the enemies of the Jews to King Ahasuerus then to Artaxerxes.

These kings followed Cyrus, Darius some time later. The writer seems to have included these events in order to illustrate the off-and-on but persistent opposition to the returned exiles for a hundred years or so.

The Power of Persecution
4:24

The Power of the Prophets
5:1-2

Search of the Archives
5:6-6:5

Darius's Decree
6:6-8

6:9-10

6:11-12

Temple Completed
6:13-16

Ezra Returns
7:1-6

7:10

Ezra was sent by the king to teach and enforce the law of God
7:25-26

Marks of Ezra's Confidence
#1 He believed in a _____ God.

1:1 ---

1:5 ---

5:5 ---

6:22 ---

7:27-28 ---

7:9 ---

8:18 ---

8:22 ---

#2 He _____.

8:21-23 --- Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him." So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

#3 He knew the _____ of God.

7:6 ---

7:10 ---

7:21 ---

The People Relapse and Repent (9 – 10)

9:1-2 ---

9:3-5 ---

9:6-9 ---

9:10 ---

9:13-15 ---

10:10-12 ---

The Message of Ezra is that the God who exiled His people for their sin sovereignly returns them to the land to _____. He has punished but not forgotten his people. He uses all sorts of means to accomplish His purpose of restoration. That purpose is also His work. In faithfulness He directs attention to the people's sin. No sooner have they gotten back in the land than they are _____ it yet again. But He is still faithful through the preaching and teaching of His word. Yet the problem of sin lingers. Is there any hope for conquering it?

Nehemiah

Background and Introduction

Nehemiah's ministry begins in the same general period as Ezra's. The twentieth year of Artaxerxes would be about 13 years after Ezra's first journey to Jerusalem.

Outline

- I. Rebuilding the Walls (1-7)
- II. Renewing the Covenant (8-13)

The Message

Nehemiah's Burden

1:1-4

Nehemiah's Prayer

1:5-7

1:8-11

Nehemiah's Request

He requests of the king to be sent to Jerusalem to _____ it.

The king granted his request "because the good hand of my God was upon me." (2:8)

Nehemiah's Leadership

He arrives and _____ the people to rebuild.

They face opposition but persevere and complete the work.

Paul House writes, "As he attempts his work, Nehemiah depends on God's _____ and covenant for the strength and peace he needs to persevere. Like Ezra, he is a _____ motivated man, though his theology leads him to more tasks commonly considered _____ than does Ezra's. Nehemiah's life underscores the point made in Proverbs that no aspect of work is secular or sacred. Remnant persons know that life, work, family, nation and theology must always be fully integrated, never separated as if the Lord were not sovereign over some specific thing that occurs in God's creation." (House, Old Testament Theology, 518.)

Nehemiah is confident in the God who made the heavens and the earth and who rules them and who keeps His _____.

1 --- as we have seen

2:8 --- And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

2:18-20 ---

4:4-9 ---

4:14 ---

4:15 ---

4:20 ---

5:9 ---

6:9 ---

6:15-16 ---

God has effected the rebuilding and repopulating of Jerusalem. "Years of delay and defeat have ended. A remnant leader has arisen that settles remnant followers into the process of reclaiming the holy land, the holy city and the holy covenant. Still, all that is mentioned [by the prophets] has hardly transpired. The people have made a start, yet the whole of Jerusalem is not holy to the Lord, the Davidic _____ is not in place, the people's _____ are not wholly changed, and evildoers are not yet eradicated. Short-term promises are being kept now, but long-term, permanent solutions to Israel's problems await completion. The canon indicates that more will be done by the God who governs human events." (House, 519)

Renewing the Covenant

The people gathered and Ezra brought the Law before the assembly.

8:4-8 ---

The people grieved when they heard the _____.

8:9-10 ---

The fact that the people ask for the law seems to indicate that they have had a change of _____.

The fact that the Levites help Ezra in teaching the word to the crowd represents a return to their calling.

Teaching the word faithfully appears to have produced fruit among the people.

"With the revealed standards placed before them, the worshipers proceed to confession and repentance, the logical response to what they have been taught. At first they express profound sorrow over what they have heard, presumably because they recognize the distance between the standards that are explained and their actual conduct." (House. 520)

But as this occasion is supposed to be one of joy, the leaders tell the people to rejoice in God. The joy of the Lord is their strength.

Through the teaching of the law the people discover that they have neglected the Feast of Tabernacles which is supposed to be observed in that very month so they immediately gathered provisions and built tabernacles and there was great rejoicing. Day by day Ezra read to them from the book of God's Law.

After keeping the feast, the people held a solemn assembly. They gathered with fasting and in sackcloth.
9:2-3 ---

They rehearsed Israel's history in terms of God's mercy and blessing and patience amidst the faithlessness of the people.
9:30-31 ---

Confessing the disobedience of their past kings, princes, priests, and fathers, they seek a covenant renewal.
9:36-38 ---

10:29 ---

They further promised

Not to _____ (10:30)

To keep the Sabbath (10:31)

To support and not neglect the Lord's _____ and its service (10:32-39)

Others moved in to Jerusalem to populate and strengthen the city.

House describes the concluding chapter of the book this way:

Reforms are not automatically permanent. They must be maintained vigilantly. Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem for a time, only to discover a good bit of spiritual decline upon his return (13:4-31). He deals decisively with the offenses, but the problems will most likely arise when he is gone again. There is no guarantee that short of the emergence of the long-term blessings outlined in the Prophets and Daniel, any enduring covenant keeping will ensue. In other words, all lasting change must be a work done by the Lord. Human initiative alone will never bring the blessings set forth in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. (House, 521)

Ezra-Nehemiah conveys a message of hope and frustration.

House concludes:

God has restored Israel to the promised land, to the chosen site of worship, to a secure defensive position, to a set priesthood, to societal purity and to doctrinal normativeness. Yahweh's sovereignty, mercy, compassion and faithfulness have all once again been proven in real historical circumstances. The people have responded well to these divine attributes and the works that necessarily attend them. A serious remnant serves Yahweh now. Still, long-term promises await fulfillment. It is clear, though, that the source of further blessing is the God of Scripture, who inspires the remnant's adherence to their relationship to Yahweh and Yahweh's word. (House, 522)

The message of Ezra and Nehemiah is one of the joy of return, the providence of God, the centrality of God's word among his people, and of hope for the future since there appears to be flickers of genuine renewal among the people. They re-enter into covenant with the Lord. But in a short time this repentant commitment appears to wane. No amount of national discipline it seems is going to be able to bring about true lasting obedience and joy. What else could there be to fulfill God's covenant promises? Surely, the promises made through the prophets about a coming servant and a new covenant by which God's law is written on the hearts of men are yet to be realized but can be anticipated.