

Introduction to Ezra/Nehemiah

Ezra/Nehemiah
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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra. Ezra 1. We're actually going to be looking at the... The title of the message is "Building God's Kingdom in Uncertain Times." Today we're basically introducing the book of Ezra/Nehemiah and I say that advisedly. Ezra/Nehemiah. That's actually what we're gonna study, those two books in our Bibles but historically in the Hebrew Bible it was one book, the book of Ezra/Nehemiah. It wasn't really separated commonly until about 900 AD and I think it's just kind of an unfortunate development that confuses things a little bit. It's not terrible because the books are still right there together but I think they're meant to be read as one unit, that when it was originally given, it was given by an author who recounted the story of Ezra and the story of Nehemiah in one work, and so we want to look at it that way.

We finished James a month or so ago and my general pattern is to move from New Testament to Old Testament to New Testament to Old Testament so that we hear the whole counsel of God's word, not just New Testament, and so we're moving to an Old Testament book for a period of time. We should move a little faster than we do in James or New Testament epistles. I hesitate to promise that. It has a way to come back around on me, but that's my plan. You know, we only, a man plans, the Lord directs his steps. So anyway.

So we're in the book of Ezra/Nehemiah, introducing it today and that the theme basically is how to build God's kingdom in uncertain times; how to build God's kingdom in times of opposition, great opposition; increasing at times to tremendous heights of difficulty. So what I want us to do to introduce it is to basically I think it will help us to, because this is so important for us to hear God's word and understand the time in which it was given and understand the times about which it's talking, and this is somewhat elusive because we're dealing with a book that deals with the post-exilic period, after the exile, what happened after the exile, and this is actually, Ezra/Nehemiah if you think about the beginning, the Old Testament, you know, you have different types of literature but essentially you have the predominant type of literature in the Bible is narrative. You know, we're talking about genres of literature: you have poetry; you have narrative; you have prophesy, prophetic oracles; you have law; so you have Psalms and wisdom literature. So you have all these different types of literature, well, the main type in the Bible is narrative and narrative is the telling of a story. And you have when you put Genesis through to Revelation, you have a historical narrative that begins with the creation in Genesis 1:1 and then recounts

throughout history the history of God's working before the call of Abraham, then the call of Abraham, the beginning of the nation of Israel, and the Old Testament is the story of the nation of Israel from Abraham all the way to Ezra/Nehemiah. This ends the historical narrative in the Old Testament. This book was probably the last book written. If not, Malachi was but it was one of the last two. In fact, Malachi was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. His ministry was contemporaneous with their ministries.

So we're coming to the end of the Old Testament narrative. Just to put that in context, now the New Testament narrative starts with Luke 1, picks up again, the narrative picks up again, the historical. You have 400 years of silence, it picks up where? With a couple who were childless, Zachariah and Elizabeth and you hear about the birth of John the Baptist. I'm talking about not Matthew 1:1 but Luke 1:1 is the one that goes back to the earliest point of the New Testament narrative. Where does the New Testament narrative end? It ends where we ended just a few weeks ago in Acts 28 with Paul in Rome. Then you have all the other books or other epistles are written to the churches around before and after that narrative ends, and of course, ending with the book of Revelation.

So we come in Ezra/Nehemiah to the end of the Old Testament story, the end of the narrative of God's working in the Old Testament people of Israel. Now to look at this, what I want to do is I want us to use the five W's and an H. That's our outline so my points are gonna be one of the W's, wrapping up with H. So five W's. You know, what, when, why, who, where, and H, how. Questions that will help us to put ourselves in to have better familiarity with what's going on in the circumstances about which this book is dealing.

So: what, that's the first W, the first point. What is this book about? What's the matter of the book? The meat of the book? What's it about? Well, we've said it's a narrative and it's telling us the last parts of the Old Testament narrative but it's a book about building. It's a book about building. Ezra chapters 1 to 6 recount the building, the rebuilding of the temple, the return of the people from exile and the rebuilding of the temple. Then in Nehemiah 1 to 6, it's about the building, rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. So intricately woven into this narrative is the building of the temple and Jerusalem. It's a book about building.

It's also a book about the return from the exile. A book about the return from the Babylonian exile. A return that takes place in three installments. This is essentially the way the book flows. It's three basic installments of the return. First of all, the book tells of the first return under a man named Zerubbabel who was a descendant of David who led the first major migration back from Babylon to Jerusalem and to Israel, and with him over 42,000 Jews returned. They returned after Babylon, remember, who conquered Israel was itself conquered by the Persian, Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede, the Medo-Persian Empire, a combination of two countries destroyed Babylon and Cyrus issued an edict in which he allowed the people of Israel to go back and he commanded them to go back and build the house of the Lord. So that's where it starts and it tells that the story of that return and the rebuilding that takes place over a 20-year period. They get discouraged. They stop building and then how God gets them back into building until

they finally complete it. That's the first installment. That's Part A of the outline of the whole book, the return, if you think of it as the return. Part A is under Zerubbabel.

Part B is under Ezra. There's a 60-year gap where we know nothing about what happens, just jumps in chapter 6 of Ezra to chapter 7, there's a 60-year gap, and Ezra actually comes onto the scene and he is concerned to go back to Israel to continue building the people of God with the word of God, and he's commanded by the Persian king to go back and teach the law of God. It's amazing how God is bending the will of the rulers of these great nations. It's one of the underlying themes is the sovereignty of God over all.

So the second installment is Ezra's return which happened in 458 BC. So we went from basically 516 to 458. We don't know anything about that but then we know from 458 the narrative picks up and he tells us about Ezra's return and it carries for about a year and then we have another gap of time, about 12 years, and the third return, the third installment of the return is under Nehemiah. Nehemiah's burdened about the walls being down, the gates being off the city, the people being plundered by their enemies, and so he petitions the Persian king and the Persian king sends him on a mission to rebuild the walls.

So what's it about? It's a book about building, it's a book about the return from the Babylonian exile. That's "what." Second W is when. I mentioned it already a little bit but I want to unpack this a little more. The events cover from 538 BC to 430 BC, 108 years. It starts with the Cyrus edict where Cyrus the Persian, who has conquered Babylon, declares he wants the Jews to go back and rebuild the house and he gives them all of the treasure that was in Nebuchadnezzar's temple in the temple of his god in Babylon; he takes out all of the things that have been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem and he sends them back to rebuild. And it goes through, as we mentioned, Nehemiah's ministry of more than a dozen years in Israel.

Now to put that, that's the time period of the events recounted but to put that time period in kind of the biblical timeline I think is helpful. Most of us don't have as much of a working knowledge of this as we really ought to. This is something that I hope that we'll be able to do a better job of teaching our young people because, you know, when you're young, you can learn anything. Now you can learn anything when you're old too but it's just a lot harder, isn't it? But you know, kids when they're young, they learn the history and this is one of the great things about some of the programs that you see out in homeschool teaching programs where while their brains are sponges, they just teach them all the details and then they can put everything into that framework. Well, there's a biblical framework and it's helpful to have that in mind, and I want to walk through it with you and I want you to think about this and sometime this week look over it, familiarize yourself with it so that you can be, you may already have this but it may help you just to hone in a little bit on what's actually happening in the overall picture of what God is doing.

I mentioned that and to understand what's happening here in the post-exilic period, the return from exile, we need to put that in context in what God's doing in building a nation.

He called Abraham to himself around 2100 BC. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their lives and God's ministry in their lives which we have recounted from Genesis 12 basically to Genesis 50. I mean, you've got Joseph thrown in there too but essentially that's a period from 2100 to about 1850 BC, 250 years. The call of Abram to the death of Jacob where the book basically ends, Genesis ends.

Well, by the time Jacob has died, his 12 sons are flourishing in Egypt, remember. They go down to Egypt during the famine and they grow from 70 persons to several millions in Egypt over a 400-year period. And in 1446 BC, God raises up Moses and says, "Let My people go," and that's the exodus happens in 1446 BC. This is the Lord fulfilling his promise to Abram. Remember he promised to give Abram a land, a seed, and his presence or blessing. There's three promises in the Abrahamic covenant: the land of Canaan, a great nation and a seed to come from that would be a Redeemer, but basically the land, the nation and his presence.

So we then see as the exodus happens, they wander for 40 years and in 1406 they enter the land and conquer it under Joshua, 1406 BC. God gives them the land of Canaan which is a type of heaven according to Hebrews 11, and he's teaching us salvation principles, which I'm not gonna unpack today, we'll talk about them some as we go along, but Canaan is a type of heaven. Read Hebrews 11 and you'll see this. Hebrews 3 and 4 actually teach this as well. It was a picture, a land flowing with milk and honey. What is it like to dwell, how can you dwell in God's land. He's teaching us in the way he deals with the people of Israel and how can you dwell in God's land?

Just to give you a little bit of how the Bible uses this. God is basically using the people as object lessons to teach us things about ourselves and the exodus is about that. How can we as sinners come back to God? That's the big question of the whole Bible and God's beginning to unfold this in his ministry to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their people, and what he says is, "I'm gonna give you a land flowing with milk and honey where I will dwell with you. I will be your God. You will be My people." And how is this going to happen? The exodus tells us something, "For you to come and dwell in My land, in Canaan, in heaven, you must be delivered from slavery." Do you see how that's, it's a word picture. The reason God sent them into Egypt wasn't just so that they could, you know, overcome the famine, it was so that they would later be enslaved. He tells Abraham this in Genesis 15, "Your descendants will be enslaved in a land for 400 years." Why? "Are You just gonna forget about them, Lord?" No, God's teaching something urgent and important. It's more important than his people having comfort and ease. You see, God's highest priority is not my comfort, your comfort and ease. It's just not and praise his name it's not, because it'd be great to be comfortable and easy all through your life and then die and go to hell, wouldn't it? It's like being on the Titanic: great ship, great food, great dessert, bad ending.

So the Lord, he's teaching us, "Hey, there's something wrong with you. It's much more profound than you think." You're a slave. I'm a slave. We're slaves to sin. Jesus teaches the same thing in John 8:31-44 when he says, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." The Jews said, "We've never been enslaved to anybody." He says,

"Everyone who sins is a slave of sin." You see, the exodus was about showing you, you need to be delivered from slavery and this is what salvation is. What happens in salvation? Colossians 1:13, God delivers you from the domain of darkness and transfers you to the kingdom of his beloved Son. You're under the god of this age, you are children of the devil. That's what we come into this world as. We must be delivered from that. We need a great Savior to deliver us.

So God's teaching that in the way he deals with the people of Israel all throughout the history of Israel. How can they dwell in the land? They need to be delivered from slavery. Then they need to live by faith and obey his commands. To do that, they're gonna need new hearts. That's the whole basic thing he's teaching. It ends up with them, we need new hearts. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, the exilic prophets. The reason you're cast out of the land, the reason you are cast out of the land is you need new hearts. That's the only way you can be delivered from sin and slavery is to have a new heart.

So the exile is teaching them that, and then in the return of the exile is teaching them more about, because what does it mean to dwell in the land? He's still teaching this narrative because he's preparing them for the coming of the one who will deliver, the Lord Jesus Christ. The whole history of Israel, one of the, I think it was one of the Puritans said that the story of the history of Israel is basically the fashioning of a womb for the Savior to be born in, out of. It's all there making the way for Jesus Christ to come.

So this part of the narrative is going to have that same thing, so let me just kind of recount to you, though. So God delivers them from Egypt in 1446. They go into the land of promise in 1406. Joshua and the judges rule them from 1400 until 1050. Then the Lord installs a kingdom. He makes what we would call a united kingdom, a united monarchy. Not the United Kingdom over there in England and Britain, I mean, but in Israel. And it's the northern, it's the whole, all the 12 tribes under one king. Saul from 1050-1010 basically. David from 1010-970. These are the glory days and it gets even better in 970 when Solomon comes on the scene, builds the temple from 970, and he reigns until 930, 120 years of a united kingdom and even that was teaching us how to live. How can you dwell in God's land? You need to have God's king. Not a king like Saul which, remember they wanted a king, Saul was tall, he looked like the perfect prototypical king and yet he was not a man of faith, and God chose a guy who didn't look like, seemed least likely to succeed. Remember, he was the one that his dad when he knew, remember when Samuel goes to Jesse and he says, "One of your sons is gonna be crowned king," Jesse didn't even bother calling David in from the field. "It can't be him." I mean, I don't think he probably thought that, he just didn't think of him at all, and God said, "That's the one. There's a man after My heart."

So how do the people of God dwell in the land? They have to have a king like David, and yet David's still not perfect, is he, because he sinned. They have to have a king like David, they need the son of David. Well, then Solomon comes and he looks great at first but then he falls, and so it's a son like David and like Solomon but greater than David and greater than Solomon. We must have him as our king to set us free from slavery. And what's happening is the outward and visible is moving and there's this transition toward

the spiritual realities, the Old Testament marching from the outward picture to the inner spiritual reality throughout the movement of the Old Testament.

So now those three kingdoms and God basically to help them see it's not about the earthly kingdom and they sin and they fail, he destroys the earthly kingdom, divides it in two after the death of Solomon. Ten tribes go with a man named Jeroboam, and two tribes go with Solomon's son Rehoboam, but Rehoboam is the descendant of Solomon, thus the descendant of David. He's the one through whom the Messiah will come. So you have the northern kingdom called Israel. It can be confusing here. The northern kingdom which are the less good guys have the title Israel, and it's really the more bad guys, not the less good guys. The more bad guys are in the north and they're called Israel. The less bad guys are in the south, they're called Judah. And so it's a divided kingdom from 930 until the destruction of both kingdoms.

The northern kingdom is so wicked it's destroyed only just over 200 years after it's born. In 722 BC, the Assyrians, they don't take them into captivity, they annihilate them. They do take them into captivity but there's no return from it. The northern kingdom is basically just annihilated as it exists. I mean, there are still Jews out there that are being faithful but they're dispersed all over. You have, there is no identity of them anymore.

The southern kingdom continues on. God delivers them from the Assyrians in a mighty way: Hezekiah, Asa. Anyway, so they continue on until 606-586 is a 20 year basically threefold exile. Nebuchadnezzar comes and he takes away a portion of the Jews in 606. This is when Daniel and his three friends were taken captive. The first installment of the exile. The exile technically begins 606, 605 BC.

The second installment is in 597. What happens is the Israelites keep listening to the false prophets who tell them, "Hey, we're God's people. We are undefeatable. I know we lost in 606 but we're undefeatable now." And they keep listening to them and Jeremiah is saying, "Stop listening to the false prophets. God is doing this. You need to repent and don't fight against the Babylonians." But they keep not listening to Jeremiah. They listen to the false prophets and they have a second installment, Nebuchadnezzar comes again in 597, this is when he takes Ezekiel captive.

Well, Jeremiah is still prophesying and telling the truth and they're still not listening and they rebel again and in 586 Nebuchadnezzar comes back, he lays waste Jerusalem and he takes down the temple, destroys it. 586 the southern kingdom ceases to exist. Now they're taken captive, though, in large numbers in 586. Three installments, a number in 606, a number in 597, and a number in 586, and basically the whole nation. I mean, there are some people that are left behind but basically the whole nation is taken captive.

Now what is happening here? It's a word picture again. God told them when they first went into the land, they're about to go into the land, he gives them the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy before they go into the land. And Leviticus, the Lord had told them, "Listen, if you get in the land," this is like chapters 20-25 somewhere in there, "If you get in the land and you start doing the abominable things

that the people that were in the land when you came," and he starts citing what they were. The people in the land were incredibly wicked. I mean, they were, all kinds of sexual perversion, bestiality, all kinds of wicked things happening among the people in the land. He says, "If you become like them, the land will vomit you out." You see, you can't dwell in the presence of God like that, so the word picture then is that's fulfilled, that prophesy is fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity, the land vomits them out. So the overall message is we cannot dwell in God's presence. We need new hearts. We need a Savior.

So they're taken captive to Babylon in that 20 year period, now they're all in captivity in 586 and this is where Daniel, the five chapters of Daniel gives us, I mean the first six chapters of Daniel are narrative, and so they carry us through this part, partly, but then they end with, actually they kind of overlap a little bit because Daniel 6, Daniel is an old man in the lions' den and if you read that, chapter 5 is when the Babylonian kingdom is destroyed. Daniel 5 recounts the destruction of the Babylonian kingdom, doesn't tell you who did it but chapter 6 tells you it was the Medes and the Persians because Darius the Mede is the one Daniel is dealing with in chapter 6. It was Cyrus the Persian, Darius the Mede in alliance. Cyrus was the greater but they both were pretty great. I mean, warriors and that kind of thing.

So anyway, so Daniel tells us that part. Well, what happens then after Cyrus, the first thing, one of the first things he does is he starts sending people back to their ancestral lands. He doesn't just do this to Israel, it's his policy just to do this to all of his people. He thinks it's the best way to keep order is to send people back to their ancestral lands and to have them rebuild their temples. So it's not really a picture of Cyrus being a believer in Yahweh or anything, it's just a pragmatic, I think it's a pretty wise pragmatic policy actually and it's common grace but it's not saving grace, but in the providence of God, how did this man come to do that? Because God had decreed that the captivity of Israel would be 70 years. This is in Daniel 9, the last six chapters are the visions of Daniel, in Daniel 9 we're told Daniel was reading the Scripture and he saw in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 25 and chapter 29, verse 13 or something like that, chapter 25 or chapter 29, I don't know the verses. Anyway, so he saw in the book of Jeremiah that the captivity would be 70 years. Daniel reads that and he's sitting there thinking, "606, 539," we don't know what year it was exactly, it must have like 539, 538, and he's thinking, "It's about time. Seventy years are almost up." And so what does he do? He doesn't start to call a party and like make an announcement, you know, "Great news! Great news!" What he does is he fasts and he prays and he asks God to fulfill his word and you see the fulfillment of his word at the beginning of the book of Ezra.

Let's read verse 1 of Ezra 1. We'll read 1 to 4, actually.

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

Much of Ezra is in Aramaic because what he does here is he gives us the Aramaic, that's the language of the Persians and the Babylonians was Aramaic. So it goes from Hebrew in verse 1 to Aramaic in verse 2. "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia," thankfully we're reading it in English verses 1 and 2.

2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

Then it recounts how the people are gathered, 42,000 of them, we're told their names, their lineage, we're told about the things that he brings out of the temple. Then they go back and they begin to rebuild.

So the first installment, then, you see, is now them going back to the land because the Lord told them, "You're gonna be cast out of the land but I will bring you back to the land, and when I bring you back, I'm gonna do some great things." But what essentially happens and this is something that you've got to understand for what this was going on in the minds of the people who went back, they were expecting a return of glory physically. They were expecting, "God's gonna send us back to the land and He's gonna put one of His sons of David over us and we'll have a king again and we'll be free." But the Lord never does that again. I mean, not.... They do have a brief period of freedom under after the Maccabean revolt but it's brief and then it ends with pain. Essentially what God is gonna show them is, "Listen, My program is now completely different than it was before because I'm weaning you off of the outward and the visible and I'm showing you that the real heart, the real problems are problems of the heart inward and spiritual, and I want to deliver you from the inward and spiritual. That is what will make the eternal difference."

So this is an underlying current that the people aren't fully understanding but God is teaching them through what we see recounted in Ezra and Nehemiah, he's teaching them that. So one of the purposes as we go through this book, is for the Lord to wean us off because this is the relevance it has for us as Christians on this side of Calvary. We still have a tendency to be too at home in this world, don't we? We have a tendency to put our hopes in the things of this life and one of the things that this book is intended by God to do is to help us to lessen the hold of the things of this world and to long for the things that really are valuable. The things which are visible are temporal, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4. The things which are eternal are invisible. Things which are invisible are eternal.

So the first return, then, is recounted. What happens in the first six chapters, it covers from 538, the Cyrus edict, the return, they get there probably back to the land about 536.

We don't have all of these years spelled out clearly. You'll see there's some references to time as you go along, and of course, the challenge of knowing what the times are, you have to, this is where it's good to have a good study Bible that'll help you understand because they're talking about when they say the 20th year or the 7th year, they're talking about the 7th year of the reign of the king. That's how they told time back then. They didn't have BC and AD back in BC. They didn't know that they were BC. So it's something that later we had to go back and figure out and calculate when are these times exactly in terms of before the coming of Christ.

Now so what happens is they have, they come and they encounter opposition, surprising opposition because they had the Cyrus edict telling them, "You guys are supposed to help us," and it should be great and they go back and things aren't great and this is one of the things that happens. It's like, why? As a reader, we all want things to work out. As just a Christian, as a human being, we were made for a world where things work whether you always get a return. I mean, it doesn't happen in a fallen world but that's what we were made for. Our wiring is for things to work and to, you know, when Adam tilled the ground, it did exactly what it was supposed to do. No weeds. Isn't it amazing how easy weeds grow? How well they grow even in drought conditions? You have to fight to keep your grass alive. Man, your weeds, they're, "Hey, we're fine. We don't need any help. We'll be here," you feel like they'll be here after we're gone, the weeds will still be there. It's not really true but, well, their descendants will be.

So we were made for a world that works and so they expected to go back and to have God's blessing come flooding in and, you know, what happens is they run into surprising opposition, difficulty, challenges, and the Lord is allowing that because his agenda is not our personal ease, comfort and happiness. We think it is. He's teaching them it's not. We'll see when we read about this, that what they needed to do was to realize when they met opposition they were supposed to pray more fervently and to fight for victory in getting this temple built. They were wrong to let the work stop, even though the work stops at one point by a decree of the Persian Emperor after Cyrus dies, another Emperor decrees that they stop working on the temple and by force of arms, they're stopped because the people there don't want them doing it because the people there hate God. But they weren't supposed to stop. What were they supposed to do? They were supposed to appeal to the Emperor and pray to the Lord, the same thing we're doing with the county. You appeal to the county but you pray to God. You don't stop appealing. You don't stop praying. You do both. This is one of the things that is so beautiful about this book, you see the practical nature of living out the faith. You'll see Nehemiah is basically you're building with one hand and you're holding a sword with the other. You're praying and you're ready to fight. This is reality. To build God's kingdom in difficult times takes this kind of determination, this kind of humility, this kind of perseverance.

So that's the first section. Remember I said that there's three sections of the book. The first return, they return in three installments so we're talking about when, that's 538-516 or basically, yeah, 538-516, 22 years, Ezra 1-6. The second installment, 60 years later Ezra comes back with a group of people, much smaller number. The total of all three is probably about 50,000 people. So the first was 42, over 42, so the second installment is

much smaller. Ezra comes back to teach the law of God and the hand of God is upon him and the Lord is doing great things and moving the heart of the king again to send him there, and the king instructs him, "Go teach the word of God." Isn't that amazing? Like the President saying, "Hey, what we need is more teaching of the word of God. Teach the word of God." That was the decree, and he wasn't telling to teach it to everybody, "Go back and teach it to the Israelites." That would be more like for us if the President said, "All you preachers out there, stop your nonsense and preach the word!" That's the same kind of thing that happens here. That's a miracle.

So you see God doing things like that and you would expect, then, that when Ezra comes back, it's gonna be easy, it's gonna be preaching and people are getting saved and it's like the Great Awakening. Only it's not like that. He gets there and right after he gets there he finds out that the people that have already returned, though the Lord was working with them to get the temple built and they saw some wonderful things happen, they have forsaken the Lord in ways that are heartbreaking, and one of Ezra's main prayers in the book of Ezra is him crying out to God in repentance and brokenness for the people's unfaithfulness. But then the Lord brings about an area of repentance and they do come back and they put away their foreign wives and they return to the Lord, and so the book, the first part of the book, Ezra, this is actually the second part of the book, but the first two parts are in the first book, and the third part is the second book. Does that make sense? Ezra, Part 1, Part 2, are the first two returns. The third return is all in Nehemiah. We're saying it's all one book.

So Ezra ends also on a sad note. I mean, it's a happy note but it's a sad note. It's bittersweet and that's essentially what the Christian life is. Until Jesus returns, life, living for Christ, building his kingdom will always be bittersweet. It will always be a battle. There will be moments, mountaintop moments but there will be a lot more moments of just plodding, trying to be faithful; moments of broken hearts; moments of agonizing pain, and the call to us is to keep fighting for God's kingdom, first of all, in our hearts. All we can control. All I can control is my heart. All you can control is your heart and that's the call. God will help you but it won't be easy. Don't expect it to be easy. The whole word of God tells us this. We would like it to be easy, the world tells you everything can be easy. That is a lie. Kingdom stuff doesn't happen easily. Even though Jesus has done everything, to be sanctified, to do the work of really following Christ is a war and this is what this book teaches us.

The third return happens 13 years later, 445 BC. Nehemiah hears about what's going on with the temple, Jerusalem, the walls are down, and he goes back to rebuild and, again, man, it's an incredibly difficult prospect though he has a piece of paper from the Emperor. He is cupbearer to the king. I mean, he's one of the most influential people. The cupbearer was one of the most trusted people for the king because he's the one giving him his wine. You know, back then there was a lot more assassinations and poisonings that happened. The cupbearer was someone who was trusted. Nehemiah is trusted and yet when he goes back, it's still not easy. Now of course, this is before the internet so he couldn't immediately send an email out, "Hey, King, they're really messing with me. Would you send word over?" You know, it's like send a camel, wait for six months to get

word back. A lot of bad stuff happens in six months, right? So anyway it was a different world, but even today it's still not that easy. Even though with the internet we still have to fight.

So that's "when," and Nehemiah spends about 12 years there and then he goes back to the king and then he comes back again and checks on things. So basically 445 to about 430 is Nehemiah's ministry recounted in the book of Nehemiah. The first six chapters, they finish the wall in 52 days. That's pretty amazing. Again, bittersweet. That's awesome but then things are still not that great. Lots of challenges.

The third W is where. We'll look at these next ones a little quicker. Where. Babylon and Persia and Israel, Jerusalem. Babylon is essentially Iraq, modern-day Iraq, especially the southern part, the southern two thirds or half of modern-day Iraq was Babylon roughly. Persia was the kingdom immediately to the east of Babylon which corresponds to modern-day Iran, the southern half of modern-day Iran was Persia. The Medes were kind of up there in the north across both of those countries. So their movement is over a thousand miles or 800 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem, longer from Susa in Persia to Jerusalem. That's the "where."

So we talked about what, we've talked about when, we've talked about where, number 4: who. And key people to have in your mind as you read as we go forward, the three key players, the first one is a name that's not so familiar at least, this is one somebody ought to name their son. This is an under, I don't know if I've ever known a Zerubbabel. I hope that doesn't happen to Jonathan or Maggie, you forget that John. No, Zerubbabel, that would be, you'd have to just call him Z or I don't know. Anyway, Zerubbabel is the first key character in the book. He is a descendant of David, anointed by the Lord, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and he helps lead the people back to Israel and he's a key leader throughout the rebuilding of the temple. It's also got the name Joshua, the high priest, but Zerubbabel is the main character in Part 1, the first return.

And as I said, he's a descendant of David because part of the message is keep looking to the line of David. The Messiah will come. We need someone to change our hearts, we need a king that is like David but greater than David, a king like Solomon but greater than Solomon. Keep looking at the descendants of David. That's why the Gospels, Matthew and Luke both spend extensive time with genealogies telling you something about Jesus Christ, and that is that he is a descendant of David through his father, earthly father, legal father, not his true Father, God is his Father, he is born of a virgin, but even legally through his earthly father he's of the line of David, and also Mary's of the line of David. So it's keep your eyes on David and his line, and one thing you see in Ezra/Nehemiah is great attention to lineage, descendants, what tribe are you from. Why? God put that in their hearts to keep them knowing he's sending a descendant of Abraham, a descendant of Isaac and Jacob, Judah, David, Jesus.

So Ezra is the next person. He's a priest and a scribe, skilled in the law of God. He's a man enabled to teach the word of the Lord, and he brings the word of God really for the first time in the history of the nation. I'm talking about pre-exile, anytime. I mean, Moses

was there but this is the first time where the preaching of the law of God is really done and we see it in actually Nehemiah 8 because he's still ministering with Nehemiah. In Nehemiah 8 you have a wonderful picture actually of expositional preaching, people gathering around to hear the word of the Lord and the people giving the sense of what it means, exegeting, leading out the meaning, expositing, exposing the truth to the light.

Nehemiah, the third, the cupbearer to the Persian king, a great organizer, administrator, and a great man of prayer. Incredible the example of prayer set by Nehemiah. We're going to see that. We'll look at it a little more in a moment.

So that's the "who." And of course, the people of God, may have to add a D to this point 4. The people of God, the remnant. It is only a remnant, though. Millions went over, only 50,000 come back in fulfillment of what Isaiah said, what God will do, he will bring back a people and it will be like a stump of a tree, but through that stump, a branch will come, a root of Jesse and David.

So that's the "who." So now the fifth W, why. And I've already told you that. Essentially the theme of the message is the reason he gives, he does these things in these three installments, the way he works with the people, what he's teaching them is he's teaching them how to build the kingdom, the invisible kingdom of God, how to build the spiritual kingdom of God in times of uncertainty and opposition. So it's about building. It's about building the kingdom in your life and building the kingdom in other people's lives in the church. How to build God's kingdom in times of uncertainty and opposition. That's why.

Then we come to the sixth point which is the H, how. How are we to build God's kingdom? And this is, again, I'm giving just an overview and we'll see these things and we'll unpack them as we go through it but these are key things that if you can kind of keep them in mind that will help you as we move forward, and I encourage you to read the book yourselves and be thinking about this and seeing these themes. I mean, he's calling us to do it and this book gives great instruction on how to do it. How do you build a kingdom when opposition, when uncertainty are all around you? When the world is as difficult a place as it is to live for God?

Three major themes that run through the book that I think are key to how we build his kingdom in our hearts, our lives, our families, and the lives of others. How do we build God's kingdom? Three subpoints under number 6, how. The first subpoint is worship. Worship. Keep worship central in your life. Make worship, place it at the center of your life. We were created, why do we exist? We exist to worship God. What's the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. We were made for worship and we were made to worship the one true living God. This is made clear in especially the first section, it's the whole book but especially the emphasis on rebuilding the temple. The point is you rebuild the place of worship, at that time that's the place you have to meet God. Rebuild that. Make that your priority.

I mentioned that the work gets stopped, remember, and there was actually a decree of the king that stops it, and we're going to see they should have kept praying and sent another

envoy to the king to say, "Hey, you need to check your records. Cyrus told us to do this." They didn't do that. They just said, "Okay, we'll stop." And the Lord raises up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who preached to them and say, "What are you doing?" Haggai's message is essentially, "Why are you living in paneled houses when the temple of the Lord lies in ruins? Why are you guys taking care of everything that you need for your personal comfort and the place of worship is a, just a rock pile?" And he says, "Don't you understand this is why you put money into a purse with holes in it. God is confounding everything you do because worship is not central." So the book of Haggai is a prophet God raised up, the message he gave during the time of the book of Ezra/Nehemiah is covering. Zechariah is the same. They ministered together. I mean, they had separate messages but at the same time they are two prophets God raises up to get his house built.

And Ezra is showing us, yeah, it was hard, it was difficult, look, I can, I mean, when you read it, when you're first reading it you're like, "Lord, why?" That's why I said when I was reading this recently, I'm like, "Why did You let a decree happen to stop them?" I mean, I didn't say it with that tone. I hope I didn't, but you know, sometimes we're supposed to be honest with the Lord, you know, like the psalmist, "Hey, why, Lord, why did You do that?" And it was like right away the Lord, the thought came to my mind, I think it was the Spirit reminding me, why should it be easy? And I'm thinking, yeah, that's me. That's my agenda, make it easy. Why does the Lord not make it easy? Because he builds our faith.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is the story of the Syrophenician woman who goes to Jesus. Matthew 15, I forget what chapter in Mark it's in. A Syrophenician woman. The story tells us, it tells it like this, Jesus left that region, he was in Israel or in Galilee, he left that region and he went into the regions of Tyre and Sidon. He's going into the land of the unbelievers, the ungodly, the unfaithful. He's walking around there with his disciples and a Syrophenician woman whose daughter is demon possessed begins to follow them crying out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And she cries out and this is what the Bible says, "Jesus answered her not a word." Now this is where you're supposed to say why? "Lord, You're healing everybody all the time, why did You not answer her?"

The text says that the disciples, now think about this, it's so troubling that this woman is crying out like this but the disciples come up to Jesus and say, "Listen, Jesus, You need to tell her to leave because, I mean, she's making a scene. She's really annoying us and it's kind of embarrassing here." And I'm putting extra words in but I think that's essentially faithful to the text. They're like, "You've got to do something about her. Send her away." And he says, "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel." I mean, it's like they obviously were like, "Heal her or send her away." Well, "Hey, I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel," is what Jesus says. He doesn't look at the woman and speak to the woman, he tells them. But you hear, think of the woman who is asking for God to help her. She's saying, "Son of David," she is saying, "You're the Messiah. Have mercy on me!" She's expressing faith and Jesus doesn't say a word. Then he says to his disciples, not talking to her, "I was sent to the household of Israel," which is true, he was sent to the Jew first. She then comes up,

I think the text says she falls down at his feet and she says, "Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is cruelly demon possessed." And he says to her, this is the third rebuff he gives her. The first was he answered her not a word. The text tells us in that he heard her but he didn't answer her. Secondly, he speaks to the disciples which is basically in a sense seems like a stiff arm to her. Now you have to put these things in context of what you know about Jesus in other places. Don't jump to conclusions and stand in judgment on the God who will judge you. Faith puts it in context of other things. There must be something else going on.

But it gets a little worse before it gets better. She says that to him, "Have mercy on me, Son of David. My daughter is cruelly demon possessed," and he says this, "Shall I take, should I take bread from the children's mouths and give it to the dogs?" Essentially telling the truth that relatively speaking the Israelites were so much less ungodly than the people of Tyre and Sidon and the worldly who had no knowledge of God. And she says this, "Yes, Lord," she agrees with him, "You're right but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." And he says this, "Oh, woman, your faith is great. Go your way. Your daughter is healed." Why did he do what he did? He was drawing out her faith. He was loving her by saying no to draw out how great her faith was, and when she said, "Lord, help me," he said, "No," she said, "Lord, help me," he said, "No," she said, "Lord, help me. Lord, help me," he said, "No," she said, "Lord, please help me," he said, "Yes." That's the ways of God. His ways are not our ways. He's so much wiser than we are. We deign to stand in judgment of God so easily. "Why did this happen, Lord? Why did this happen to this person, this on top of everything else?" And we don't know what we're saying. The God of heaven who is good in every fiber of his person, his tri-person nature, every part of him is good, he cannot do evil. He has a reason.

He's doing something like that in the life of the nation of Israel in Ezra/Nehemiah. He's like saying, "I'm going to do this," and they say, "Yes, Lord, we want that," and then he puts the brakes on. Why? So that we would want it, they would want it more and pray more earnestly and seek him more fervently, because you see, God is not about giving us merely a temple, merely city walls, he wants to give us a living relationship with a God who loves us intimately and cares for us personally. He wants us to know him. He's willing to be difficult with us so that we will come to know him. Isn't that wonderful? That's the God of the Bible and that's the God that we meet in the pages of Ezra/Nehemiah.

So how? Put worship central, quickly, second point is we will see these unfolded more clearly later, the word of God. It's worship, here are the three things: worship, the word, and prayer. How do you build his kingdom in times of uncertainty and opposition? It's keep worship central, keep the word primary and keep prayer, I mean, keep praying. Pray continuously.

Now the word keep the word primary, you see it at the beginning the power of the word. The verse we read earlier in chapter 1, verse 1, to fulfill the word of the Lord to Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus. What was happening is God's word was coming true. God's word cannot but come true. God's word cannot fail so the message is keep the

word of God coming into your heart. Keep the word of God coming into your mind. Keep the word of God, abide in the word of God, live in the word of God because the word of God will not fail. It will create more faith. You're weak in faith, stay in the word. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. Stay in the word. So live in the word. Ezra's a man of the word. The people become people of the word in the book of Ezra/Nehemiah.

Then prayer, the third. Worship, the word, and prayer, and we see this in Ezra's life but we really see it come to just the spotlight in Nehemiah's life. Nehemiah is an amazing man of prayer. I mean, chapter 1, he finds out what happened, how bad things are, he doesn't sit there and lament, he doesn't turn on the news to hear more about it, he prays and he fasts. Then he goes in to talk to the king and as the king, he goes in and the king notices that he's sad and the king asks him, "What is this, the sadness of a heart?" And Nehemiah is not privy to speak to the king but it says before he spoke to the king he prayed to the Lord. We don't know what he prayed. It was like a flare prayer but the man was always praying, and you read through the book and it keeps happening like that. Opposition comes up and Nehemiah is like, "Lord, deal with these people. Lord, help me in this situation." I mean, you'll read it and you'll see it. They are like half a line prayers that's all we know that he said. He may have had a lot more to say and it's just summarized in that, but what we know is his instinct was always to pray. What did Jesus tell us? Or what does Luke tell us in Luke? Jesus taught these parables so that we would know that men are always to pray and not to lose heart.

So we must become people of prayer. We must become people of the word. We must become people of worship. That's what this book is calling us to and if we do that, we will build his kingdom. Will it be easy? Never. I mean, not never, not likely. The moments that are easy, rejoice in them but don't get comfortable in them. It's just a difficult place to live for God but we have a God who delights to show himself strong in the difficulty and to reveal himself to you in ways that you could not know him but for the difficulty. Make that your heart's desire and he will be with you and he will enable you and he will work through you. May God help us do that.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we praise and honor You, the King of heaven and earth. You reign and You rule over all things. You do all things well. Lord, forgive us for our faithlessness, how proud we are, how self-focused we are, how we want what we want and we don't even know what we should want. Lord, there is no health in us, no wisdom. We need Your grace. We constantly need a Savior and we need the King that is greater than David to reign and rule in our hearts. Father, we pray for those that are here today that have never let Him reign and rule in their hearts, that they would repent and surrender to Jesus Christ. What a worthy King, One who laid down His life, One who gave everything so that we who have nothing could have everything. Father, help those of us who know You to treasure knowing You more, to make our one passion to be pleasing to You and to know You more, not to have things go well, not to have success but to have more of

Christ, to have more of Your Spirit working in us. Build us, Lord, build Your kingdom in our hearts, build Your kingdom in this body. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.