



# Ezra & Nehemiah

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## INTRODUCTION

Ezra and Nehemiah detail the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity. Ezra begins with the surprising decree from Cyrus that permits captive Jews “to go up to Jerusalem... and rebuild the house of the Lord.” Can exiles, seeped in a pagan culture, return to a life of religious purity? Will they have the skills to rebuild a temple and a wall? Will their leaders be strong enough to withstand the enemies within and without?

While some might focus on the rebuilding of the temple and walls of Jerusalem in these books, accomplished in spite of great hardship and opposition, the rebuilding of a spiritual community is of even greater significance. Wise and godly leaders Ezra and Nehemiah challenge the returned exiles to reclaim an identity as the people of God.

An understanding of that identity grows as they work sacrificially alongside one another, as they worship together and as they embrace the words of scripture with repentance and obedience. They are always in danger without these practices.

Ezra and Nehemiah remind discouraged leaders and rebuilders that God is in the restoration business. His gracious hand rests upon all those who seek to faithfully build His kingdom.

## LESSON ONE: EZRA 1:1-2:70 AND 2 CHRONICLES 36:11-23

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Is there a former home or homeland that you would like to visit?*

1. Why had Jerusalem fallen? (2 Chronicles 36:11-16)
2. What happened to the temple after Jerusalem's defeat? (2 Chronicles 36:18-19)
3. What challenges awaited the exiles in Babylon?

2 Chronicles 36:20

Psalm 137

4. How are these challenges still present today among displaced persons?
5. Why did God intervene at this time in history to bring His people back?

Ezra 1:1

Jeremiah 25:12-14

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Daniel 9:1-19

Note: Daniel prayed this prayer (Daniel 9:1-19) in the year 539 B.C., at the time Cyrus conquered Babylon.

6. How did God intervene? (Ezra 1:1b, 1:5)
7. Who was Cyrus?

Ezra 1:1-2

Isaiah 45:13

What do you find most remarkable about him?

Note: Isaiah who ministered in Judah 742-686 B.C. prophesied these words long before Cyrus was born.

8. What did Cyrus decree?

Ezra 1:2

Ezra 1:3

Ezra 1:4

9. Why did some exiles return to Jerusalem and why do you think some chose to remain in Babylon? (Ezra 1:5)

Note: The four-months journey back to Jerusalem was difficult, dangerous and costly. Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside were in ruins and inhabited by hostile people.

10. Why was the temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt? (Ezra 1:2-5)

11. Who contributed gifts to help rebuild the temple?

Ezra 1:6

Ezra 1:7-11

Ezra 2:68-69

Note: The "Cyrus Cylinder", a historical record from this time, attests that Cyrus returned divine statues, rebuilt temples and repatriated former inhabitants.

Note: The list of returning people in Ezra 2 shows the strength of family groups after two generations in exile. These would not be robbed of their past or their future as God's chosen people.

12. How does this lesson's picture of God's intervention in history encourage you?

Memory Verse: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with all who love Him and obey His commands." *Daniel 9:4*

Prayer Guide: Lord, move my heart.

## LESSON TWO: EZRA 3:1-5:2

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Have you ever started a project with enthusiasm that came to a standstill?*

1. Why was it important to build the altar first? What practices did it bring back into the lives of the returned exiles (Ezra 3:1-6, see also Matthew 6:33)
2. What did the people have to overcome in order to obey the Lord? (v.3)  
What might you have to overcome to obey the Lord? What first steps might you take?
3. What worship accompanied the building of the temple foundation (Ezra 3:10-13)?

4. Why was sorrow present for some and joy for others?

Ezra 3:12-13

Haggai 2:3

Psalm 126

Note: The surrounding people were ancestors of the Samaritans who included worship of Jehovah among other gods.

5. What danger do you think enemies pose who pretend friendship?
6. Why might the surrounding people have offered to help rebuild?
7. Why did Zerubbabel refuse their help? (Ezra 4:1-3, see also 2 Kings 17:24-33)
8. What did the response of the surrounding people to Zerubbabel's refusal reveal about them? (Ezra 4:4-5)

Note: Ezra summarizes the entire story of opposition to building in Jerusalem in verses 4:6-23. He flashes forward, showing that opposition to the work of God's people was a reoccurring problem.

Note: Artaxerxes, who stopped the building, later authorized the repair of the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1-9).

9. What accusations were made against the Jews in the letter sent to Artaxerxes?  
(Ezra 4:12-16)

10. What was the king's response to their letter and with what result? (Ezra 4:18-22)

11. What prophets motivated the people to resume temple rebuilding? (Ezra 5:1)

12. What were Haggai's word of judgment?

Haggai 1:2-13

13. What were the prophets' words of encouragement?

Haggai 1:13

Haggai 2:4-5

Haggai 2:6-9, Luke 2:25-32

Zechariah 4:6-9

Memory Verse: "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house, says the Lord Almighty. And in this place I will grant peace, declares the Lord Almighty." *Haggai 2:9*

Prayer Guide: Lord Almighty, grant Your peace.

### LESSON THREE: EZRA 5:1-8:36

**OPENING QUESTION:** *What did you learn as a child about trust?*

1. Why was the work of the temple not stopped, even in the face of opposition? (Ezra 5:1-5)
2. What did governor Tattenai and his associates seek to establish with their letter to King Darius? (Ezra 5:8-17)

3. How did the decree of King Darius promote temple rebuilding?

Ezra 6: 3-5

Ezra 6:6-7

Ezra 6:8-10

Ezra 6:11-12

What did the decree reveal about Darius' own spiritual convictions?

Note: The temple was rebuilt approximately 70 years after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B. C. This temple remained in use through the time of Christ until its destruction by Titus in 70 A.D.

4. How did the people celebrate the completion of the temple? (Ezra 6:16-22)

5. Why did the people celebrate the Passover?

Exodus 12:21-28

Ezra 6:19-22

Note: The extensive genealogy of Ezra (7:1-6) establishes his religious authority within the Jewish community.

6. Who was Ezra? (Ezra 7:1-12)
7. Why did Ezra's plan succeed? (see also Proverbs 2:1-5)
8. What did King Artaxerxes ask Ezra to do when he reached Jerusalem? (Ezra 7:14-26)

Note: The absence of Levites among those returning to Jerusalem would have hindered the reestablishment of temple life. (Ezra 8:15-20)

9. Why did the people fear the journey?
10. In-light of these fears, what preparations did they make? (Ezra 8:21-23)
11. What are the fears you have as you journey with God and what preparations can you make?
12. Why were they reluctant to ask the king for help?  
7:27-28  
  
8:22  
  
Psalm 146:3-5  
  
Isaiah 25:9
13. Why is it so tempting to trust an "earthly king" instead of God?
14. What steps did they take to protect the temple treasure? (Ezra 8:21, 24-34)  
What lessons can you learn from this example?

Memory Verse: "The gracious hand of the Lord is on everyone who looks to Him." *Ezra 8:22b*

Prayer Guide: Lord, hold me in Your gracious hand.



## LESSON FOUR: EZRA 9:1-10:44

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Have you ever broken something and been relieved to confess it?*

1. What problem did the returning exiles discover among their fellow Jews who had returned eighty years earlier? (Ezra 9:1-2)
2. What had the Lord commanded His people to do when they entered the promised land? Deuteronomy 7:1-16

Ezra 9:10-12

3. Why were they to do this?

Deuteronomy 7:4

Deuteronomy 7:6

Deuteronomy 7:9-16

1 Kings 11:1-6

4. What was Ezra's initial response to the news of the people's unfaithfulness? (Ezra 9:3-4)
5. What did Ezra confess? (Ezra 9:6-15) Why do you think he confessed as if these sins were his?
6. What is true repentance and why is it so important?

Ezra 9:4; 6-15

Psalm 51:16-17

Ezekiel 18:30-32

Jeremiah 15:19

James 4:9-10

7. How can unconfessed sin affect your relationship with God and others?
8. Read Psalm 32. How might confession open the way for new freedom and joy in your relationship with God and others?
9. What did Shecaniah say to encourage Ezra to accomplish a difficult task? (Ezra 10:2-4)
10. How might you encourage a leader in a difficult place?
11. What steps did the Israelites take to restore their relationship with God? (Ezra 10:5-17)
12. What do you learn about good leadership from Ezra?

Memory Verse: "If you return to me, I will restore you that you may serve Me."  
*Jeremiah 15:19a*

Prayer Guide: Lord, restore me.

## LESSON FIVE: NEHEMIAH 1:1-2:20

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Recall a time when someone noticed your sadness and encouraged you.*

1. Who was Nehemiah? (Nehemiah 1:1, 11)
2. What was Hanani's report about the conditions in Jerusalem? (Nehemiah 1:2-4)
3. What was Nehemiah's reaction to the bad news and what did that reveal about him?

What is your usual reaction to bad news and what does that reveal about you?

4. Examine Nehemiah's prayer. (Nehemiah 1:5-11)

What did he give thanks for?

What did he confess?

What did he ask for?

What promise did he remember? (see also Deuteronomy 30:1-5)

Note: There was a four-months lapse between the time Nehemiah received the bad news and his appearance before the king.

5. What prompted King Artaxerxes to question Nehemiah? (Nehemiah 2:1-3)

What might Nehemiah have missed without such transparency?

What might you miss?

6. What reveals that Nehemiah had been prepared through prayer for his encounter with the king? (Nehemiah 2:1-8)

How is your prayer preparing you?

7. What were Nehemiah's requests from the king?

Nehemiah 2:5b

Nehemiah 2:7

Nehemiah 2:8

8. How did the king respond to Nehemiah and why?

9. What lengths did Nehemiah go to in his inspection of the Jerusalem wall?  
(Nehemiah 2:11-16)

10. What was the outcome of his inspection?

11. What opposition arose and what form did it take? (Nehemiah 2:10, 19)

12. What words of Nehemiah gave the people courage to begin rebuilding?  
(Nehemiah 2:17-20)

To whom do you speak words of encouragement?

Who speaks encouragement into your life?

Memory Verse: "O Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of this Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight in revering Your Name."  
*Nehemiah 1:11*

Prayer Guide: Gracious God, hear my prayer.

## LESSON SIX: NEHEMIAH 3:1-6:19

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Were you ever part of a team that accomplished something significant?*

Note: Chapter three gives an overview of the wall's reconstruction moving counter-clockwise from the Sheep Gate in the north around the mile-and-a-half structure.

1. What is the value in working with others to accomplish a task?
2. Why do you think the names of individuals were listed in the passage?  
(Nehemiah 3:1-32)
3. What were the occupations of those who rebuilt the wall? What does the diversity of the manual labor force reveal about Nehemiah as motivator?

4. Who sought to discourage the Jews from rebuilding and what tactics did they use?

Nehemiah 4:1-2

Nehemiah 4:3

Nehemiah 4:7-8

Nehemiah 4:11

Nehemiah 6:1-9

Nehemiah 6:10-14

Nehemiah 6:19b

What reasons would a person have for using such tactics today?

5. What was Nehemiah's response to enemy attacks?

Nehemiah 4:4-5

Nehemiah 4:9

Nehemiah 4:13

Nehemiah 4:14

Nehemiah 4:19-20

Nehemiah 4:22-23

Nehemiah 6:8-9

Nehemiah 6:11

How do his responses personally challenge you?

6. What injustice threatened the Jewish community? Nehemiah 5:1-8

7. What commands of God were violated? (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:39-43)

8. What steps did Nehemiah take in response to the injustice? Why was each step critical (Nehemiah 5:6-13)?

9. How does Nehemiah's example of generosity challenge you to greater generosity? (Nehemiah 5:14-19)

10. What was the impact of the wall's completion on the nations surrounding Israel? (Nehemiah 6:15-16)

11. Read 2 Corinthians 4:6-9 and 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17. How do these New Testament verses encourage you in the face of opposition and difficulty?

Memory Verse: "Remember the Lord who is great and awesome." *Nehemiah 4:14b*

Prayer Guide: Lord show me Your greatness.

## LESSON SEVEN: NEHEMIAH 7:1-10:38

**OPENING QUESTION:** *When have you experienced grace through the forgiveness of another?*

Note: While the first part of Nehemiah focused on protecting the people within the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem, the second part focused on spiritual rebuilding.

Note: The list of Israelites in Nehemiah 7 repeated the list of Ezra 2 and was used by Nehemiah to help repopulate Jerusalem with representation from each tribe in Israel.

1. What did Nehemiah do, once the walls were built, to further protect Jerusalem?

Nehemiah 7:1

Nehemiah 7:2

Nehemiah 7:3

Nehemiah 7:4-5

What did these actions reveal about Nehemiah's leadership?

2. How did Ezra prepare the people for faithful living? (Nehemiah 8:1-3)
3. Why was hearing and understanding God's word such an important preparation for the people?

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Deuteronomy 31:9-13

Joshua 1:6-9

Psalms 119:9-16

4. Why does hearing, understanding and obeying God's word remain so important today?

John 15:9-17

2 Timothy 2:15

Hebrews 4:12

James 1:19-25

5. What steps were taken by Ezra and the other leaders so that the people could hear and understand God's word? (Nehemiah 8:4-12)
6. Why do you think the people wept? With what words did the religious leaders comfort them? (Nehemiah 8:10-11, see Psalm 51:1-12 and Romans 3:20b)

Note: The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated God's protection of His people through the wilderness wanderings after their deliverance from Egypt. (Leviticus 23:33-44)

7. What happened when the returned exiles obeyed God's command to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles? (Nehemiah 8:16-18)
8. Describe the people's gathering to worship and confess. (Nehemiah 9:1-5)
9. What sins did they confess? (Nehemiah 9:16-37)

What consequences did they experience as a result of their sins?

10. What acts of God's grace did they remember and give Him thanks for?
11. What do you miss when you fail to remember and give thanks to God for His grace?
12. What assurance of God's unfailing love encourages you no matter how many times you fail Him?
13. What did the people promise to do to prepare for a life of renewed obedience? (Nehemiah 10:28-39)

How can you prepare for a life of renewed obedience?

Memory Verse: "You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." *Nehemiah 9:17b*

Prayer Guide: Lord have mercy.



## LESSON EIGHT: NEHEMIAH 11:1-13:31

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Did you ever get into trouble as a child when your parents were gone?*

Note: The tribe of Levi was to minister to God's people as priests. They received no tribal inheritance of land for *the Lord was their inheritance*. The law stipulated that the people should provide for them with tithes and offerings.

1. Why might people have been reluctant to resettle in Jerusalem after the completion of the temple and the wall? What steps did Nehemiah take to solve this problem? (Nehemiah 7:4, 11:1-3)
2. Who was brought to Jerusalem for the dedication of the wall? Nehemiah 12:27-28
3. Why do you think purification was part of the preparation for this worship celebration? (Nehemiah 12:30, Leviticus 11:44-45)
4. How does purification remain an important part of worship preparation today?  
1 Peter 1:13-16  
1 John 1:5-10
5. What role did music play in worship celebrations then and what role can it play today? (see also Colossians 3:16-17)
6. **Read Psalm 48.** Why was Jerusalem so precious to the Jewish people?

Note: Nehemiah returned to Persia after twelve years of serving as governor in Jerusalem. Upon his return to Jerusalem, probably no more than two years later, he discovered the misuse of the temple storeroom and other violations of the law.

Note: God's exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly was in response to their refusal to assist the Israelites during the wilderness journey. (Deuteronomy 23:3-6)

7. What threats to spiritual wholeness did Nehemiah discover upon his return to Jerusalem?  
Nehemiah 13:4-9  
Nehemiah 13:10-12  
Nehemiah 13:15-22  
Nehemiah 13:23-27

8. What previous commitments and promises had the people broken?

Nehemiah 10:29

Nehemiah 10:30

Nehemiah 10:31

Nehemiah 10:39a

Nehemiah 10:39b

9. How did Nehemiah work with the people to restore spiritual wholeness?

10. Are there practices in your present life that threaten your spiritual wholeness?  
What might you do with God's help to be restored?

11. What did Nehemiah want to be remembered for?

Nehemiah 5:19

Nehemiah 13:14

Nehemiah 13:22

Nehemiah 13:31

12. What do you want to be remembered for?

Colossians 1:3-4

2 Timothy 4:7-8

Hebrews 6:10-12

1 Thessalonians 2:8, 3:12-13

Memory Verse: Remember me O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. *Nehemiah 13:22b*

Prayer Guide: Lord, transform me.


## REVIEW

1. What verses do you most want to take with you from this study?
2. How has the study helped you to grasp God's involvement in history?
3. What have you learned about leadership from Ezra and Nehemiah?
4. What wisdom have you gained to help deal with opposition and and difficulty in your life?
5. How have you been challenged to pray and how have you seen God answer prayer?
6. What have you learned about repentance and forgiveness?
7. How has your understanding of worship been enlarged?
8. What are you thankful for?

## Time Chart B.C.

Jeremiah	Daniel	586	Fall of Jerusalem and Temple by Babylon, Judah exiled to Babylon	King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon	
		586-538	Judah's Exile in Babylon		
		539	Cyrus II of Persia captures Babylon	King Cyrus of Persia (539-530)	
		538	Cyrus allows exiled Jews to return to homeland		
		537	First group of Exiles return to Jerusalem – led by Zerubbabel (Ezra1:1-6:22) - 800-mile journey		
		536	Temple Building begins		
		530	Temple work halted		
		522	Darius becomes king of Persia	King Darius (522-486)	
Zechariah Haggai			520	Temple Building resumes Messages of Haggai, Zechariah	
		516	Temple Rebuilding completed		
		478	Esther in Palace of Xerxes	King Xerxes I (Hebrew)Ahasuerus (485-464)	
		458	Second group of exiles return led by Ezra (Ezra 7:7-8) 20 <sup>th</sup> year of King Artaxerxes' reign (Neh.2:1)	King Artaxerxes (465-424)	
		445	Third group returns led by Nehemiah Jerusalem's Wall is completed		
	433	Nehemiah returns to Babylon			
Malachi		432	Nehemiah goes back to Jerusalem 32 <sup>nd</sup> year of King Artaxerxes' reign (Neh.13:6-7)		

## Glossary

Artaxerxes	465-424 BC – allowed both Ezra and Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was his cupbearer.
Artaxerxes	Son of King Xerxes. Ruled Persian 465-424 BC. Supported Ezra’s work. (Ezra 7:12-26). He granted Nehemiah’s request to go to Judah. (Neh. 2:5-6)
Cyrus Cylinder (539)	 <p>An ancient clay cylinder, now broken into several fragments. It is currently possessed by the British Museum, which sponsored the expedition that discover the cylinder. The cylinder’s text is seen by Biblical scholars as evidence of Cyrus’ policy of the repatriation of the Jewish people following their Babylonian captivity.</p>
Eliashib the high priest	Grandson of Jeshua led the priests in working on the northern wall around the Temple.
Ezra	Priest, descendant of Aaron – Teacher of the Law of Moses. About 80 years after the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel led the second group of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem 458 BC. (Ezra 7:7-8)
Feast of Tabernacles	During this 7-day feast people lived in booths made of branches to commemorate God’s protection of His people through the wilderness wanderings after their deliverance from Egypt. (Neh.8)
Fish Gate	Here people sold fish from the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea
Haggai	Prophet. Haggai, along with Zechariah, helped Zerubbabel gain the support he needed to rebuild the temple. The Book of Haggai linked worship and work. It revived hope for the future in a dejected community. (Ezra 5)
<b>King Cyrus II</b>	King of Persia 559 to 530 BC Cyrus and his Persian forces defeated the city of Babylon 539 B.C., just as Daniel had predicted (Dan.5) He allowed the Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem.
King Darius	King of Persia 522-486 B.C. The Jews received financial aid for finishing the temple in Jerusalem. (Ezra 6:8-9)
Nebuchadnezzar II	King of Babylon 602-562 B.C.
Nehemiah	Assistant to King of Persia. Governor of Judah. Led the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem.

Sanballat	Governor of Samaria around 407 B.C. In league with Tobiah and Shemiah, opposing Nehemiah's rebuilding efforts.
Satrap	Political office in the Persian Empire comparable to lieutenants (Ezra 8:36)
Sheshbazzar	Persian-appointed governor of Judah who laid the foundation of the Temple Ezra 5:14-16 – led the first group of exiles in the return to their homeland (also Zerubbabel)
The Sheep Gate	Was where the people brought in their sheep on their way to sacrifice at the Temple.
The Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel	Two major military towers along the northern wall. (Nehemiah 3)
Tobiah	Major adversary to Nehemiah's rebuilding efforts; practicing Jew who lived in a residence chamber in the Temple; called an "Ammonite" (Ne. 2:10)
Zechariah	Prophet.
Zerubbabel	Led returnees from Exile in 539. He together with Jeshua, the high priest, laid the foundation of the temple and rebuilt the altar in their second year (538BC). Their work was halted by the opposition.

# THE PERSIAN EMPIRE 458 B.C.



## JERUSALEM DURING THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH

