

## THE BIG READ (48)

### Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah

#### A. Introduction

1. Every book of the Bible has one dominating theme – Jesus is the Christ.

“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”  
(Luke 24:45-47)

Jesus is the Christ who will suffer and die.

Jesus is the Christ who will rise from the dead on the third day.

Jesus is the Christ who will forgive the sins of all who repent.

Jesus is the Christ who will be preached to the nations.

2. The Old Testament that Jesus read contained the same 39 books as our English Bibles but was arranged in a different order.

It had three sections – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44)

The final section of the Old Testament is the Writings.

Whereas the Prophets looked back to what happened to Israel and why it happened in order to call the nation to repent and return to God, the Writings looked forward to the hope that was coming to those who repent, through a King like David, and showed those who did, how to live faithfully in all of life’s circumstances as they waited for His arrival.

This means that though the books found in the Writings sections were written at different points in Israel’s history, it was after the Babylonian exile was over, that they were collected together to give the remnant hope and guidance as they waited.

3. The penultimate book in the Writings is Ezra-Nehemiah.

Though we are more used to treating them as individual books, like Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible.

After the Persian king, Cyrus the Great in 539BC gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, only a smaller number (50,000 out of a 2-3 million Jews) did.

Most chose to remain where they had been scattered to, and the book of Esther whilst focusing in on the story of Mordecai and Esther who lived in the Persian city of Susa during the reign of Xerxes (486-465BC), tells how God cared for and preserved them.

Ezra-Nehemiah however is about those who did return to Jerusalem from exile, and records the last events of the Old Testament period of history.

Just as the Israelites were taken into exile in three successive stages (in 605, 597 and 586BC) so they returned in three stages each recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah.

The first in 538BC with Zerubbabel.

“Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah).” (Ezra 2:1-2)

The second in 458BC with Ezra.

"This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes." (Ezra 7:6-7)

The third in 445BC with Nehemiah.

"I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time." (Nehemiah 2:5-6)

## **B. Getting Started with Ezra-Nehemiah**

### 1. Who wrote Ezra-Nehemiah?

We can't be sure.

Jewish tradition cites Ezra as the author of the book, although it could easily have been written by Nehemiah.

Whoever it was (and my leaning is towards Ezra), referred to and incorporated a number of different sources when writing this book under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

These included the personal memoirs of Ezra/Nehemiah, royal edicts, letters and lists of various kinds.

### 2. What is Ezra-Nehemiah about?

It is a book about the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem – both were completed despite opposition because God was with them.

"The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him." (Ezra 7:6)

"He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him." (Ezra 7:9)

"Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me." (Ezra 7:28)

"Because the gracious hand of our God was on us..." (Ezra 8:18)

"We had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." (Ezra 8:22)

"On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way." (Ezra 8:31)

"And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests." (Nehemiah 2:8)

"I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me." (Nehemiah 2:18)

But it is not just a book about the rebuilding of physical structures.

Another key feature of both Ezra and Nehemiah is the rebuilding of God's people spiritually back in the land after the exile was over.



“On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD’s temple had not yet been laid.” (Ezra 3:6)

In spite of opposition, which for a time brought the building work to a standstill, the temple would be rebuilt.

“The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.” (Ezra 6:15)

### 3. In Ezra 7-10 we see how the rule of God is rebuilt and restored.

Ezra and the second wave of returnees arrive in the land, to discover that the people already in the land were not living in a way that was faithful to God and His Word.

“After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.” (Ezra 9:1-2)

Ezra called the people to repent of their sin and submit to God’s rule over them by separating from their foreign wives.

“Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt. Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.” (Ezra 10:10-11)

### 4. In Nehemiah 1-6 we see how the city of God is rebuilt and restored.

Whilst the temple had been rebuilt, the city of Jerusalem had not been. News of this reached Nehemiah the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.

God put it in Nehemiah’s heart to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls, and with God’s help this task was successfully completed.

“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God.” (Nehemiah 6:15-16)

### 5. In Nehemiah 7-13 we see how the people of God is rebuilt and restored.

After the walls were rebuilt, the city needed to be repopulated.

“Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return.” (Nehemiah 7:4-5)

Nehemiah needed to make sure that those who would live in the city were God’s people and were committed to living under His rule. So Ezra reappears again to read the law, lead the people in confessing their sins, and then recommitting to obeying God’s Word in specific areas of their lives.

The people of God were in Jerusalem once again, worshipping God and living under His rule.

But this wouldn’t last. After time with King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah would return to Jerusalem where he would discover that the people had allowed an enemy into the city; had stopped supporting the Levites; were trading on the Sabbath; and were engaged in intermarriage once again.

Nehemiah corrected these abuses, but for how long would this last?

#### **D. Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah**

1. Jesus builds His church by bringing people back from exile.

“Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah).” (Ezra 2:1)

The return from exile is a picture of what God’s salvation is like. It is being brought back to God from a place of judgment.

2. Jesus builds His church by bringing people back to worship.

By sacrifice.

“Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.” (Ezra 3:3)

By service.

“Then I said to them, “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” (Nehemiah 2:17)

By submission.

“and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.” (Nehemiah 10:29)