

EZRA-NEHEMIAH & ESTHER

Introduction

Today we'll look at Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The first two tell us about the Jews' return from exile, just as God has promised through Jeremiah the prophet. Yet, they show us that something is still missing. Things just don't seem to be as glorious as were predicted by the prophets. Where are the New Heavens and the New Earth that Isaiah spoke of, which was supposed to accompany the return? Why don't the people have the new hearts that Jeremiah predicted? Where is the glorious and magnificent temple that Ezekiel saw? And further, why hasn't everyone come back? That is a question that looms in the book of Esther. The people we'll meet in that book are still in a foreign land. So, after the exile some things are just as predicted and promised. But many of God's promises have yet to be fulfilled.

Slide One

The books that we will go through today cover about 100 years of history, with Ezra starting off in 538 BC and ending off in about 433 BC in Nehemiah.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah originally constituted one book, though it was separated into two books since the middle ages.

The authorship of both Ezra and Nehemiah is attributed to Ezra, though there are some passages within Nehemiah that come directly from Nehemiah itself

Slide 2

This will give you a brief overview of the timeline in terms of the historical events that occurred. As you will see, the book of Esther occurs in the middle of the narrative in Ezra. I put this here in order for you, as the reader and listener, to get an idea of how this all fits into history

Slide 3

This is a list of the Persian kings that lists their reign and relationship to Judah. Again, this is to give you some context as to how the Persian kings followed each other and what they have done for the Jewish people.

Slide 4

The book of Ezra continues where 2 Chronicles ends off. The book takes us after the exile is now complete. The people of Judah are now coming home.

It's a time of real excitement, hope, and optimism. It's believed that **Psalm 126** was written at this time. Verses 1-3 says, "When God restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'God has done great things for them.' God has done great things for us, and we are glad."

The redemptive-historical context is clear. After the trauma of the exile, the people are reminded that God is still faithful to His promises of old. **This is the resurrection of the nation, and the reestablishment of the old Mosaic Covenant.** But as we shall see, it is not the final coming of the Kingdom of God or the institution of the new covenant that was to come. This is still just one more earthly type of God's great work to come.

Ezra himself is a scribe and a priest. He doesn't appear in the book until more than midway through. As a scribe, he has access to the Persian archives and as you read the book, you can see that the letters and communications that have gone through the governors and the King.

The name Ezra, like Nehemiah, means "Jehovah Helps"

Slide 5

Let's make the theme of both Ezra and Nehemiah as follows:

God is renewing the covenant by restoring His people, the temple, true worship, and Jerusalem. But it's not the end, and it doesn't fulfill all the great prophecies. Thus His people look still to the future.

As already mentioned, the return from exile was exciting and joyous, however it wasn't all it was expected to be. They are back in the land, but not in the New Heavens and the New Earth—it's more a kind of "exile in the land". Some people have new hearts, but not everyone. And we have a new temple, but it is no picture of glory. It all leaves the reader longing for something more, thinking there *must* be something more to come.

Slide 6,7

Here is a brief outline of the book of Ezra. This will be different from what you have in your handout as I like to mix it up to give different perspectives on the outline.

[Read slides 6 and 7]

Slide 8

Let's walk through Ezra and I'll point out summarize the book through some key themes. And as we go I'll also fill you in on the chronology of all that's going on.

A. God Initiates and the People Respond: Ezra 1:5-6

We see King Cyrus, as moved by God, making a decree to release the people of Judah and Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

Just as promised, 70 years later *God moved Cyrus' heart* to allow the Jews to return home. This is a fulfillment of prophecy from Isaiah 45:1-5 and 13, which talks about the prophecy of King Cyrus letting the people of Judah to return back to their land. In Jeremiah, which Ezra cites, it talks about the exile lasting only 70 years. The specific references are from chapter 25:11-12 and 29:10

We also see in **verse 5** that God moved the hearts of the people to go as well. "Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem." God initiated the chain of events to restore his people, and they responded.

Slide 9

B. The People Return and Rebuild: Ezra 1:7 – 6:22

God then begins to provide, piece by piece, all that the people need to rebuild their community and their way of life in the land under God's appointed leaders. To start with, we read in 1:7 "*King Cyrus brought*

out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god” and gave them back to the Jews. This was no small thing. It probably included the golden altar, golden table, golden lampstands, golden basins, and massive bronze pillars, stands, and basins, so large they could not be weighed, as described in 1 Kings 7. This was an enormous amount of wealth. They were irreplaceable and God has miraculously restored them to the people so they could reinstitute proper temple worship again.

Next, look at 2:2, where we see the mention of a man named Zerubbabel. What’s significant about him is that he represents God’s faithfulness to the Davidic line. God had promised to David that he would have a descendent reigning over God’s people *forever*. But at the end of 2 Kings we saw the last Davidic king carted off as a prisoner to Babylon. Zerubbabel is a royal descendant of David, according to the genealogy recorded in **1 Chronicles 3:19**. So the fact that *this guy* is leading God’s people back to the land of promise means that God has preserved the Davidic line and is still committed to His covenantal promises.

Slide 10

Another significant figure is Jeshua (or some translation may render his name Joshua). You’ll notice from **verse 40** that he is a Levite, which means that, along with the line of kings, the line of *priests* is also being restored. As we read in Leviticus, it’s the priests who make atoning sacrifices and lead the people into worship of God. And so, the restoration of the priesthood is equally important for restoring the people to the land and to a right relationship with God. Of course we also know that this priesthood necessarily points forward to a greater priest to come because the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin.

The other things needed for worship, besides the priests, are an altar and a temple. We read of their construction in chapters 3-6. After some opposition from unfriendly neighbors in **chapter 4**, the work was completed in 516 BC, a little over 20 years after the people’s return (cf. 6:15).

Slide 11

Upon the temple’s completion, we read of this climatic moment in **6:22**. *“For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria [that is, Darius, king of Persia which had conquered Babylon which had conquered Assyria] so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.”* The Feast of the Unleavened Bread is the Passover. It was instituted by God during the exodus and meant to be kept by future generations to commemorate that great act of salvation. Thus, it is only fitting that worship resumes in the land, at the temple, with a Passover meal after God brought the people out again from under oppression by Gentiles nations!

But not all is right. Look back at **3:12**. *“Many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.”* Many were excited about the new Temple. But there were some present, who were old enough that they could remember what the first temple looked like. And this new temple doesn’t compare in glory to what God’s people knew before. The implicit thought is that God is not done yet and there must be greater things to come!

Slide 12

C. The People Sin and Repent: Ezra 7-10

At the beginning of **chapter 7** the story takes a big leap forward in time. We now find ourselves in 458 BC, nearly 60 years after the completion of the temple (cf. 7:7-9). Here, Ezra the priest is leading a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem. We learn about Ezra in 7:9-10 that “the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” Notice that Ezra *studies* and *does* the word of the LORD *before* he presumes to teach it.

But when Ezra arrives back in the land, he finds that many Jews have intermarried with the surrounding pagan nations, a grievous sin. We read in 9:1-3, **“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 neighboring peoples with their detestable practices... 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.’ When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.”**

Slide 13

Did you notice there that reference to “the holy race?” Literally, that word for “race” is “seed.” Recall God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 that he would raise up a “seed” to crush the serpent’s head. Israel was the carrier of the seed-promise. **If they diluted their identity by intermarrying with surrounding nations, assimilating into the pagan culture, and abandoning their unique relationship with the true God, they risked losing the promise!** If Satan can’t kill off God’s people through exile, then he’ll try to corrupt them by polluting their families and their worship.

Ezra prays (9:6-15), acknowledging the people’s sin and God’s holiness. Note the gravity of Ezra’s confession and how well he understands the consequences of sin. From verse 15 “Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence,”. **Sin separates us from God and makes us unable to stand in his presence.** In chapter 10 the people repent. Note that their repentance is not a mere acknowledgment of sin or a feeling of remorse. They take action to undo their sin. They work to re-separate themselves from the surrounding nations and send away the pagans from their midst. Repentance is not just a feeling: it is action to restore right behavior before God.

Slide 14

The lesson is that while the exiles have returned and rebuilt the Temple, God has not yet completed his plan of salvation yet. Look at part of Ezra’s prayer in **9:8**. **“But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.”** The remnant has returned, but it is only a “little relief” from bondage. When will “more relief” come? It all makes us say, “This can’t be everything; there must be more to come.”

Slide 15

We now move onto the book of Nehemiah. Some facts about Nehemiah. He was initially the cup-bearer for the King of Persia and therefore a trusted person and confidant. As we see later, he was also made governor of Jerusalem.

As mentioned before, this book is sometimes referred to as “Second Ezra” as this was not separated into its own individual book

He is not mentioned outside of this book and neither is he referenced

This account doesn't start till about 445 BC. What is interesting about this book is that it is one of the last books (besides Malachi) that records what God has said and done for his people before the 400 years of silence before Christ appears.

Slide 16, 17

Again, here is the outline for the book of Nehemiah. What I have done here, and though it doesn't contrast well on the PowerPoint slide, is to show the different focal points of the people within this book from the first part to the second part.

[Read from Slides 16,17] – **Show map of what the city walls looked like**

Slide 18

D. Nehemiah Returns and the People Rebuild the Walls: Nehemiah 1-7

As we see in Nehemiah, another phase of reestablishing the people back in the land has commenced. Nearly 100 years after the first exiles returned, Jerusalem's walls were still broken down. This meant that the people, the Davidic line, and the priest-led worship were all still vulnerable to Israel's enemies, both militarily and morally. So when Nehemiah, a government official still serving the Persians in Susa, hears about this, he weeps and sets himself to prayer.

Slide 19

What's interesting about his prayer in **chapter 1** is that, like so many other prayers in the Bible, Nehemiah begins with a confession of sins in v. 6-7. ***"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."*** And He premises his request upon God's glory. Look at **verses 10-11**. "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand." Just like so many others we've seen (Moses and Daniel to name just two), the *ultimate* goal in our asking things of the LORD, is that *He* might be glorified through giving them to us.

In chapter 2, Nehemiah sets out to return to Jerusalem, a little over a decade after Ezra returned. When he gets there he is able to convince the people to work with him to rebuild the walls.

Slide 20

We see the Jews again experience opposition from their neighbors. These enemies first mocked the Jews for undertaking such a large, difficult, and expensive task of engineering (4:1-3). But when the people are faithful and steadily make progress on the wall, the pagans' mockery turns to alarm and anger and finally to a plot to attack the builders. Nehemiah responds by arming the builders, which deterred their enemies. They then try, and fail, to undermine Nehemiah personally by slandering his reputation (chapter 6). Satan will sometimes try to attack God's people, and especially their leaders, with a frontal assault, and sometimes through more subtle means—but God is faithful to protect his people regardless.

Nehemiah also experiences opposition from *within* Israel (chapter 5). Some of the builders began to complain that the work was too expensive and they were too poor, so Nehemiah convinces the nobles and officials to stop charging interest and allow the work to continue. In the end the people complete the wall around Jerusalem in less than a year. This section of the text ends with these encouraging words in **7:73**. ***"The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the temple servants, along with certain of***

the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns.” Sounds very similar to those key passages in Joshua when the Israelites *first* took that land. It truly is a re-beginning.

Slide 21

E. The People Rejoice—and Relapse: Nehemiah 8-13

So, we come to the part that everything else has been driving to: the reestablishment of the covenant! Look at **8:8**. **“They [meaning, the Levites] read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.”** It’s interesting to note the people’s reactions. Upon hearing the law read and expounded, it says in verse 6 that they shouted, “Amen! Amen!” But then in verse 9 it says that they wept. Surely it was because they realized that they’ve greatly broken that law that was just read. But the priests told the people not to mourn but to celebrate at the reading of God’s word. It seems that the people were rightly mourning their sin, and then rightly celebrating the receipt of God’s grace in their lives.

The long rebuilding and renewal process is complete when the people bind themselves again into covenant with God, in **10:29**: **“All these [people] now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, 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.”** The people are in the land, the line of David lives on (and therefore so does the seed of the woman), priests are making sacrifices on the altar, the temple is rebuilt, the walls around Jerusalem are rebuilt, the law is publicly read and explained, and the people formally renew their commitment to God’s covenant.

But that is not the end of the story (and you knew this was coming). The covenant is no sooner renewed than the people start breaking it again. In chapter 13 we see the people violate the Sabbath. They work on God’s holy day. And they intermarry with the surrounding nations again. And so we again see that age-old problem: the law is not yet written on their hearts. The people had returned and renewed the covenant, but it was nothing like the kingdom they were expecting and hoping for. As great as it is to be home, it’s clear that this is not the full arrival of the kingdom of God. This is not the new covenant with new hearts in the new heaven and the new earth. There is still sin and death in the world.

We are here at the end of the Old Testament’s historical record, and the heart is still wickedly deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it? A greater salvation, greater than the exodus, greater than the return from exile must yet be coming. A greater kingdom, greater than David’s, greater than Solomon’s, greater than Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s, must await!

Slide 22

ESTHER

We come now to the book of Esther, which records the events of the same time but in a different place. The events of the book take place between 483 and 473 BC, over a half a century after the first wave of exiles had returned to Jerusalem, but still a decade or two before Ezra brought his wave back. However, the events do not take place in the land. They take place in Susa, Persia’s capital, where there are still Jews living in exile.

What’s really strange about the book of Esther is that God is nowhere mentioned in the story. And apart from some fasting (4:3, 16) there is not a religious note at all. With no talk of God, the covenants, the land, the temple, or David, the purpose and application of the book is not immediately obvious. So what’s its purpose in God’s unfolding plan of redemption? Well, the story illustrates through narrative the truth

that God cares for his people, that he will rescue his people from his enemies, and that God's people can ultimately rest assured that God will protect them—even when we can't see how God is working.

The author is unknown, though it is thought to be either Mordecai, Ezra, or Nehemiah

Slide 23

Theme

The theme of Esther is:

God protects his people, even if we can't see how he is working.

In a world where God is invisible, the faithful can often wonder if God is doing anything at all among us. But it's important to remember that God's acts of providence in our world are most commonly done with a hidden hand, in a way that is quite easily overlooked when we are otherwise just going about our normal lives. For the most part, God is working in His world for his people's sake in subtle ways that are easily overlooked. And sometimes, it's that subtlety that makes His deliverance all the more powerful.

Slide 24, 25

Summary

Let's briefly summarize the narrative in Esther. In the first two chapters a young Jewish girl named Esther rises in King Xerxes' favor, such that he makes her his queen. Her cousin, Mordecai overhears a plot to kill Xerxes, and so he informs Esther of this to alert the king. The plot is stopped. In chapter 3 the Jews face a crisis. A man named Haman is promoted in the king's court, and is offended when Mordecai won't pay homage to him. To exact his revenge, Haman doesn't go after Mordecai alone, but seeks to pass a decree to have all the Jews in Persia exterminated. Mordecai persuades Esther to help. She petitions the king to spare the Jews, and he relents. Meanwhile, Haman is first forced to publicly honor Mordecai for having previously helped the king, and then, after his plot is thwarted, he is executed.

Slide 26

Let's highlight a few theological themes in this story.

A. God will judge.

First, God will bring judgment on the wicked. That person is Haman. He is guilty of pride, arrogance, attempted murder, and attempted genocide. Worst of all, he has directed his sin specifically and directly against God's people, which is to say, against God himself. His evil is not random or merely selfish: it is willfully and intentionally directed against the people and purposes of God. Haman is a typical portrayal of the enemies of God.

But we see in the story that in God's providence, all Haman's plans backfire on him. Haman wants to humiliate Mordecai, but the king forces Haman to honor Mordecai publicly. Haman wants to murder Mordecai by impaling him on a pole; but the king executes Haman by hanging him on that very same pole. Haman wants to eliminate the Jews in a mass, empire-wide genocidal pogrom. Instead, God uses the occasion to allow the Jews not only to defend themselves, but to triumph over their enemies. We read in 9:2, ***“On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.”***

Slide 27

God does judge the wicked - sometimes even in this life. And so Christians should have peace about trials in this life, confident in the hope of God's sure judgment against the wicked.

Slide 28

B. God works through circumstances

Note how Mordecai persuades Esther what she can do to rescue her people from this sentence of death. **“Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” Mordecai asks in 4:14.** Mordecai believes that there is a purpose to Esther's becoming queen, and that her purpose is made clear by the opportunity presented to her to help save God's people. God uses earthly instruments, like people's actions, to accomplish His plans. In fact, as you look across the Scriptures you'll notice how rare it is that his miracles take the form of the abrupt disruption of history that you might see in, say, the Exodus. Rather, he uses people, situations, events, all quite naturally, very inconspicuously, towards the end He intends. Mordecai is telling Esther that she should understand herself and her queenship to be the instrument by which God accomplishes his purposes. Doubtless, God does not *need* any particular person or circumstance to achieve his purposes, but he has ordained in his graciousness to use people like Esther—and us—to spread his word and redeem his people “It could be you!” Mordecai is saying, “*You* could be that instrument! How exciting!” And to that he says, “Who knows?” Indeed, *who knows?*

There are no accidents or coincidences in life. God guides and directs all of his creation, and that means he guides the circumstances of your life as well. We should carefully examine the situations God puts us in and look for opportunities for evangelism and service to the Church. Our circumstances are one tool (always to be interpreted through Scripture and with guidance from other Christians) for understanding God's will in our lives.

Slide 29

C. God will save his people

The theological point here is that God zealously protects His people. This is one major theme of the entire Bible, and here it is clearly the point of this little story of Esther. It is not always clear at the time how God is working or how things will turn out in the end, but God delivers his people and carries his redemptive plan forward. And note that they way God achieved Israel's deliverance in this situation maximized his own glory and pretty much prevented Mordecai or Esther from taking much credit or boasting about anything. In fact, God's purposes and salvation in this book are even deeper and more meaningful than events on the surface might suggest.

Slide 30

Do you remember when Saul's kingship failed? It was when he refused to carry out God's command to totally destroy the Amalekites and their king Agag. (1 Sam. 15). Well, we find out in 2:5 that Mordecai is a distant descendent of king Saul and, 9:24, Haman of king Agag. In God's kindness, his rescue of his people results in redemption for the line of Saul, centuries after that disobeyed command.

Certainly no accident that these genealogical details are brought to light in this book. Again, Christians today should be able to rest content knowing that God's deliverance is a sure thing, and that while he may choose to use us as instruments at times, the glory is his.