

LECTURE 28: EZRA-NEHEMIAH
“The God who restores a remnant to his land”
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I. Orienting Data

- A. Synthesis:** Before the days of Ezra, Cyrus, the king of Persia, had issued a decree that allowed the Israelites to return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. After overviewing the first wave of returnees who rebuilt the temple, Ezra and Nehemiah lead the second and third waves of returnees to revive the faithless people and restore the city, respectively. The work both within and without identify how Israel’s restoration was only initial and how they truly needed the Messiah to establish his kingdom.
- B. Focus:** Stress that initial restoration is *not* full restoration, highlight how the internal corruption that brought about the nation’s demise still lingered, and emphasize that hope exists only for those who turn away from sin toward God. *Ezra*, short for Azariah, means “Yahweh has helped”; *Nehemiah* means “Yahweh has comforted.”
- C. Content:** Rebuilding and reform in postexilic Judah through the latter half of the 5th century B.C.; successful completion of the Second Temple and rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, despite opposition; the crisis of intermarriage and national identity;

concern from those who had returned to Jerusalem for covenant renewal and reform, based on the law.

D. Historical Coverage and Context:

1. From the first return (538 B.C.) with Joshua the priest and Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel the governors (Haggai and Zechariah as prophets) to the end of the 5th century with Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor (Malachi as prophet?).
2. Following the introductory historical recap in Ezra 1–6, Ezra 7 through the end of Nehemiah details the history of a remnant of Babylonian exiles that have returned to Jerusalem from captivity (Ezra 8:35; 9:8, 13–15; Neh. 1:3). While they are enabled to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the lives of the returnees, they still perceive themselves as “slaves” (Ezra 9:8–9; Neh. 9:36), and their struggle with sin shows that the slavery of most runs deeper (see Rom. 6:6, 16). As such, the first readers of Ezra–Nehemiah were still longing for a new exodus and the complete consummated kingdom foretold most recently by Ezekiel and Daniel, and the completion of Old Testament history is shown *not* to be the completion of God’s kingdom history and of his purposes for Israel. More is still to come.

Figure 28.1. An Overview of the Era of Initial Restoration

INITIAL RESTORATION UNDER PERSIA (539–323 B.C.) & ANTICIPATIONS OF THE RESURRECTION OF GOD’S PEOPLE			
Date	Prophets	Key Events in Judah	Key Events in Persia
550	Haggai/Zechariah	538 – First return of Jewish exiles–Jeshua/Zerubbabel 516 – Second temple completed	Daniel as court official in Babylon & Persia 539 – Babylon falls to Persia 538 – King Cyrus decrees exiles can return to homelands
500			486–464 – Esther story
450	Malachi	458 – Second return of Jewish exiles–Ezra 444 – Third return of Jewish exiles–Nehemiah	

Prepared by Jason S. DeRouchie.

Figure 28.2. Three Returns from Exile

	Return 1	Return 2	Return 3
Bible Reference	Ezra 1–6	Ezra 7–10	Nehemiah 1–13
Date Initiated	538 B.C.	458 B.C.	444 B.C.
Persian King	Cyrus II	Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes I
Jewish Leaders	Sheshbazzar and then Zerubbabel as governors; Jeshua as priest	Ezra as priest	Nehemiah as governor
Prophets	Haggai and Zechariah	Malachi?	
Elements of the Decree	All who wished could return to Judah; the Jerusalem temple was to be rebuilt, partially financed from the royal treasury; all sacred vessels taken from Jerusalem were restored (Ezra 1:1–11; 6:1–5).	All who wished could return; worship at the Jerusalem temple was to be performed and any repairs or restorations completed, partially financed from the royal treasury; allowed to have civil magistrates (Ezra 7:6–26).	Allowed to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and city wall and gates, partially financed from the royal treasury; protection by the royal army (Neh. 2:1–9).
Number returning	42,360 (returnees) + 7,337 (servants) 49,697 (Ezra 3:64–65)	1,496 (men) 38 (Levites) + 220 (helpers) 1,754 (Ezra 8:1–20)	Unknown
Events Accomplished	Temple begun; sacrifices instituted and Feast of Booths celebrated; Samaritans cause trouble, and work ceases until 520 B.C.; temple completed in 516 B.C.	Problems with inter-faith marriage; communal confession of sins.	Jerusalem temple and city wall and gates rebuilt in 52 days, despite enemy opposition; problems with oppression of the poor and inter-faith marriage; the Book

			of the Law read with communal rejoicing and the celebration of the Feast of Booths; communal confession of sins, covenant renewal, dedication of the wall, and further reforms.
Prepared by Jason S. DeRouchie. Adapted from John H. Walton, <i>Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 35.			

E. Canonical Placement and Emphasis: Rebuilding of two walls: physical walls of Jerusalem and spiritual walls around the hearts of the people.

1. Ezra–Nehemiah is a single book in the Hebrew Old Testament that describes the initial fulfillment of the restoration promised in Jeremiah (i.e., physical return) and the hope of full restoration (i.e., reconciliation with God).
2. The message stresses the incompleteness of restoration and highlights what still needs to happen for lasting relationship with God. Specifically, the need to rebuild the temple emphasizes the need for the Spirit of God to be in their midst, and the rebuilding of the city walls focuses on the need to guard against worldly influences. The book thus focuses on challenges from within and obstacles from without. Like the temple and city, the returnees need the presence of God and need to guard against all influences that would push them away from a Godward pursuit.
3. In all, God is the primary mover: “It is God who effects Israel’s return, God who makes the temple’s rebuilding possible, God who turns the people back to the Sinai covenant, God who creates the opportunity for Jerusalem to rise from the ashes of destruction” (House, *Old Testament Theology*, 512).
4. Leaving Daniel, the full restoration has been associated with “one like a Son of Man,” who would receive all authority from the Lord (Dan 7:13–14) and a “Messiah,” through whom God intended “to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place” (Dan 9:24–25). Daniel also envisioned “seven weeks” of years during which Jerusalem would be “built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time” (9:25; cf. Isa 44:26, 28; 45:13). This fulfillment would precede the “sixty-two weeks” of years before the Messiah would actually appear (Dan 9:26). Ezra–Nehemiah identifies this initial fulfillment and by this anticipates the greater return and reconciling work that the Messiah alone will bring.

II. Introduction and Conclusion

- A. **Ezra 1:1–4:** Cyrus’ decree (cf. 2 Chr 36:22–23; *ANET* 316) stresses Yahweh’s active presence on behalf of his people.
- B. **Neh 13:23–31:** The closing of Nehemiah’s prayer expresses frustration (due to intermarriage with pagans) and hope, for God alone can help.

THINK!

Read through the excerpt below from the “Cyrus Cylinder” (*ANET*, 316), where Cyrus himself describes his decree and attributes his action *not* to Yahweh but to Marduk. How do we reconcile this extra-biblical text with Ezra 1:1–4, where we are told “Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” (1:1) and where Cyrus himself testifies, “Yahweh, the God of heaven, ... has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is at Judah” (1:3)?

WINDOW INTO THE BIBLICAL WORLD

The Persian King Cyrus II (ca. 538–530 B.C.) officially brought the Neo-Babylonian Empire to an end in 539 B.C. The following inscription (ANET, 316) known as the “Cyrus Cylinder” was found on a clay barrel and describes the king’s victory over Babylon, his policy of tolerance toward conquered peoples, and his commitment to allow them to reconstruct their sacred sites / religious sanctuaries. It parallels the biblical testimony found in Ezra 1:1–4; 6:1–5; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23.

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth), son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, of a family (which) always (exercised) kingship; whose rule Bel and Nebo love, whom they want as king to please their hearts.

When I entered Babylon as a friend and (when) I established the seat of the government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk, the great lord, [induced] the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon [to love me], and I was daily endeavouring to worship him. My numerous troops walked around in Babylon in peace, I did not allow anybody to terrorize (any place) of the [country of Sumer] and Akkad. I strove for peace in Babylon and in all his (other) sacred cities. As to the inhabitants of Babylon, [who] against the will of the gods [had/were ...], I abolished] corvée (lit.: yoke) which was against their (social) standing. I brought relief to their dilapidated housing, putting (thus) an end to their (main) complaints. Marduk, the great lord, was well pleased with my deeds and sent friendly blessings to myself, Cyrus, the king who worships him, to Cambyses, my son, the offspring of [my] loins, as well as to all my troops, and we all [praised] his great [godhead] joyously, standing before him in peace.

All the kings of the entire world from the Upper to the Lower Sea, those who are seated in throne rooms, (those who) live in other [types of buildings as well as] all the kings of the West land living in tents, brought their heavy tributes and kissed my feet in Babylon. (As to the region) from ... as far as Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the towns Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der as well as the region of the Gutians, I returned to (these) sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their (former) chapels, the places which make them happy.

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him): to Marduk, my lord, they may say this: “Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son, ...” ... all of them I settled in a peaceful place ... ducks and doves, ... I endeavoured to fortify/repair their dwelling places....

(ANET, 316)

III. Message

A. Theme: The need to rebuild the broken temple and city points to the need to revive the faithless people both from within and without, all in the hope of full kingdom restoration. God may have taken the people out of Babylon, but he still needed to take Babylon out of the people.

B. Overview:

1. Rebuilding a Broken Temple in Hope (Ezra 1:1–10)
 - a. Restoring the Physical Temple in Hope (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
 - i. Thesis (announced by a pagan) (1:1–4)
 - *Cyrus’s decree: 1:2–3.* Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and 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.
 - ii. The Restoration of the Nation-Land Tie (1:5–2:70)

- *With Jeshua the high priest, Zerubbabel the governor, and Haggai and Zechariah the prophets, close to 50,000 people return to Jerusalem (2:64–65).*
- iii. The Restoration of the Deity-Nation Tie (3:1–6:22) (*with a digression in 4:5–23 that traces the history of opposition from Zerubbabel to the days of Ezra and then returns to the days of Zerubbabel in 4:24)
 - *Altar completed (3:2–3)*
 - *Temple foundation laid (3:10–11)*
 - *Temple completed (6:14–15)*
- b. Restoring the Temple’s Faithless People in Hope: Ezra’s Memoirs (7:1–10:44)
 - i. The Introduction of Ezra (7:1–26)
 - *God’s hand works for those who seek him. 7:9–10.* For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. (Cf. 8:21–22)
 - ii. The Return of Ezra (8:1–36)
 - iii. The Reforms of Ezra (9:1–10:44)
 - *Ezra pleads with God to pardon and show mercy. 9:13–15.* And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.
- 2. Rebuilding a Broken City in Hope: Nehemiah’s Memoirs (Neh. 1–13)
 - a. Rebuilding Jerusalem’s Physical Walls in Hope (Neh 1:1–7:73a)
 - i. The Crisis and Prayer (1:1–11). 1:3, 8–9. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” ... [I prayed,] “Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’”
 - ii. The Return of Nehemiah (2:1–11)
 - iii. The Rebuilding Project (2:12–6:19)
 - *The wall is complete (6:15).*
 - iv. The Repopulation of Jerusalem (7:1–73a)

- b. Rebuilding Jerusalem's Faithless People in Hope (7:73b–13:31)
- i. The Public Reading of the Law with Response (7:73b–10:27)
- *Ezra and the Levites read Moses's Law to the people.* 8:8–10. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."
 - *The Levites pray to God for help amid their dire straits.* 9:32–33. Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.
 - *Israel covenantally vows* (1) to not engage in inter-faith marriage, (2) to keep the Sabbath, and (3) to give yearly to support the ministry of the temple (10:28–32).
- ii. Demographic Issues (11:1–12:26)
- iii. Dedication of the Wall (12:27–43)
- iv. Cultic Arrangements (12:44–47)
- v. Solving Persistent Problems (13:1–31)
- *Israel breaks each of its covenant vows.* The last chapter of the book highlights how Israel continued actively breaking all three vows: (1) Failure to support the ministry of the temple (13:10–14); (2) failure to keep the Sabbath (13:15–22); (3) sustained intermarriage with pagans (13:23–31).
 - *Nehemiah's closing prayer.* Nehemiah ends the book, "Remember me, O God, for good" (13:31).

C. The Need for Full Restoration:

1. High and low points in the story that highlight the need for greater restoration.

High Points	Low Points
1. Cyrus' decree to return (Ezra 1:1–4)	2. Low number of returnees (2:64)
3. Laid foundation of temple (3:10–11)	4. Mixture of weeping and joy (3:12–13)
	5. Stopping of temple building (4:24)
6. Finished temple (6:14–15)	
7. Decree for Ezra to return (7:27)	
8. Fasting and prayer for safety (8:21–23)	9. Inter-faith marriage (9:1–5)
	10. The need for mass divorce and cleansing

	(10:2–3, 10–11)
11. Nehemiah’s prayer and plea for rebuilding and reviving (Neh 1:1–2:8)	12. Exhortation to rebuild the walls (2:17)
	13. Confronting opposition from outside: enemies to rebuilding (4:13–14)
	14. Confronting opposition from within: oppression of the poor (5:5, 9)
15. The completion and protection of the wall (Neh 6:15–7:4)	16. Priests can’t find proof of genealogy (7:64)
17. Celebration of Sabbatical year worship and covenant renewal (7:73–10:39)	
18. Dedication of the wall (12:27–30, 43)	19. More confronting of communal sin (ch. 13): sustained presence of foreigners, a priest housing in the temple, failure to provide for the priests, profaning the Sabbath, inter-faith marriage continues, desecration of the priesthood.

2. Unfulfilled promises highlight how greater restoration was needed (from Brian Verrett).
 - a. *Circumcised hearts*: Nehemiah’s prayer for restoration in Nehemiah 1 cites Deuteronomy but does not include Yahweh’s promise to circumcise hearts and generate love. The mirror endings of inter-faith marriage and divorce in both Ezra and Nehemiah’s conclusions confirm how deeply Israel needed heart transformation.
 - b. *Jerusalem without walls/protection*: Isaiah foresaw a day when Jerusalem would never close its gates or need protection, because hostility will have ceased and the nations would be part of Zion (Isa 60:11; cf. Rev 21:25–26). Zechariah looked forward to the day when the new “Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls due to the many people living within it” (Zech 2:4).
 - c. *God’s glory in the midst of his people*: Unlike what we learn about the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35) and the temple (1 Kgs 8:11), Ezra-Nehemiah never tells us that God’s glory filled the 2nd temple. What of Zechariah’s promise to be the “glory in her midst” (Zech 2:5) and to “dwell in [her] midst” (2:10–11)?
 - d. *Nations joining Israel*: Instead of the nations joining Israel (Isa 60:11; Jer 12:16; Zech 2:11; 8:22), Ezra and Nehemiah live in fear of them.
 - e. *Freedom from slavery*: Instead of experiencing a messianic new exodus of freedom (Isa 11:10–12, 15–16; Jer 23:5–8; Hos 2:15; 3:5; Mic 7:15; Zech 10:11–12), Israel remains in its land as slaves (Ezra 9:9; Neh 9:36).
 - f. *Messiah*: Ezra-Nehemiah never speaks of the Messiah on the other side of Israel’s exile (Hos 3:5; Mic 5:4).
3. Lasting Significance: Ezra-Nehemiah encourages the reader to anticipate a greater return from exile. In this exodus, God will fulfill all of his promises in the Messiah.

D. Key Teachings:

1. *God's Kingdom Purposes Stand.* The present generation has not been separated from God's kingdom purposes begun in the past. This is highlighted by:
 - a. Recalling the "70 year" exile prophecy and the promise that one named Cyrus would initiate Jerusalem's restoration.
 - Ezra 1:1. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.
 - Jer. 29:10. For thus says Yahweh: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. Cf. 25:12–13.
 - Isa. 44:24, 28; 45:13. Thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, . . . ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose"; saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." . . . ¹³ I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward," says Yahweh of hosts.
 - b. The use of numerous genealogies and lists of people to connect the present with the past (Ezra 2:3–70; 8:1–14; Neh. 7:6–73; 11:3–19; 12:1–26).
 - c. Stressing Yahweh's promise to restore after exile.
 - Neh. 1:8–9. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there."
 - Lev. 26:33, 40, 42, 45. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. . . . ⁴⁰ But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, . . . ⁴² then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. . . . ⁴⁵ I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am Yahweh.
 - Deut. 4:30–31. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to Yahweh your God and obey his voice. ³¹ For Yahweh your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.
 - Deut. 30:1–3, 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where Yahweh your God has driven you, ² and return to Yahweh your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, ³ then Yahweh your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you. . . . ⁶ And Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.
2. *The Worship and Word of God are Central.* Worshipping God and living in accordance with his Word (Law) provide the foundation and context for God's people's existence.
 - a. Ezra and Nehemiah drew firm boundaries—spiritual, social, and physical—around the community.

- i. In the Law, Yahweh had declared, “You shall be holy to me, for I Yahweh am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (Lev. 20:26). Yet in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the “holy offspring” had “mixed itself with the peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:2), following the same practices of Solomon that originally brought about the tearing apart of the kingdom (Neh 13:26; cf. 1 Kgs 11). The “remnant” was therefore putting itself in jeopardy of extinction, in light of the potential rekindling of Yahweh’s just wrath (Ezra 9:8, 13–15; cf. Neh 1:3).
- ii. As such, Ezra and Nehemiah worked hard to guard the community from pagan influence, which required both internal commitment and physical separation, all for the sake of holiness and the preservation of proper representation of Yahweh. The physical walls of Jerusalem would need to be rebuilt, which would serve the people in fortifying their own hearts from worldly influence.
 - Ezra 10:10–11. And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now then make confession to Yahweh, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.
 - Neh. 1:3. The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. Cf. 2:3.
 - Neh. 2:20. The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.
 - Neh. 7:3. Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.
 - Neh. 9:2. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

THINK!

One of the key ways spiritual, social, and physical boundaries are stressed in Ezra-Nehemiah is by the command to divorce pagan spouses (Ezra 9–10, esp. 10:11; Neh. 13:23–31). How should Christians reconcile this directive, especially in light of Paul and Peter’s seemingly contradictory statements in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 and 1 Peter 3:1–2?

- iii. Ezra and Nehemiah’s call for divorce vs. Paul’s view:
 - (1) In accordance with Jesus’ exceptions (Matt 5:32; 19:9), Paul allowed divorce in instances where the non-believing spouse “separated” from the believing spouse.
 - (a) 1 Cor. 7:10–13, 15. To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

- (b) We can align Ezra and Nehemiah’s practice with Paul’s statement if we see Paul’s meaning of a non-believer’s “separation” from a believing spouse to include not only physical desertion but also controlling influence that forces the believer to sin or that restricts the believer from living out her faith.
 - (c) Ezra and Nehemiah’s situation was also a unique one in that the entire welfare of the community was at stake.
- b. Ezra and Nehemiah also interpreted and applied Scripture to regulate the community’s life.
- i. Disloyalty in relationship with God is measured by his covenantal Word.
 - Ezra 9:10. And now, of our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments.
 - Ezra 9:13–14. And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?
 - Neh. 1:7. We have acted very corruptly against you have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.
 - ii. God’s Word must be read and applied and must lead to regular renewal in one’s personal and corporate relationship with God.
 - Neh. 8:2–3, 7–9, 11–12. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard. . . . ³ And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. . . . ⁷ Also [other religious leaders] helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, as they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. . . . ⁹ All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. . . . ¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.
 - Neh. 10:28–29. The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of Yahweh our Lord and his rules and his statutes.
 - Neh. 13:1–3. On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, ² for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. ³ As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

3. *Full Restoration Is Still Future.* God is actively working on behalf of his people in accordance with his kingdom purposes, but full restoration has not yet come.
- a. Yahweh is a God who showers favor on his people (Ezra 5:5; 7:6, 9; 8:18, 22; Neh. 2:8, 20; 4:14; 6:15–16; 9:6).
 - Ezra 5:5. But eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them.
 - Ezra 7:6. The granted him all that he asked, for the hand of Yahweh his God was on him.
 - Ezra 8:18. And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion.
 - Neh. 2:8. And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.
 - Neh. 2:18, 20. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good. . . .²⁰ “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”
 - Neh. 4:14. Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.
 - Neh. 6:15–16. So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.¹⁶ And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.
 - Neh. 9:6. You are Yahweh, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.
 - b. The enjoyment of such favor is conditioned on a life that is dependent on God’s Word and that humbly seeks God’s ways:
 - Ezra 7:9–10. On the first day of the first month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of Yahweh, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.
 - Ezra 8:22. The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.
 - Neh. 1:5–6. O Yahweh God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that now I pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Cf. 9:14.
 - Neh. 1:8–9. If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.
 - c. God’s mercy and grace are the fuel that enables the quest for God (Neh. 9:17, 31; cf. Deut. 4:30–31).
 - Neh. 9:17, 31. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. . . . In your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.
 - Deut. 4:30–31. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to Yahweh your God and obey his voice.³¹ For Yahweh your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.
 - d. God’s people must wait dependently in patience until full restoration is realized.

- i. Right after the dedication of the wall in 12:27–30, 43, chapter 13 highlights how far Israel truly was from full restoration.
 - (1) Foreigners are still present
 - (2) A priest is housing in the temple
 - (3) The community is not providing for the priests (breaking vow 3, 10:32).
 - (4) The community is profaning the Sabbath (breaking vow 2, 10:31).
 - (5) Inter-faith marriage continues (breaking vow 1, 10:30).
 - (6) The priesthood is desecrated.
- ii. Neh. 13:31. Remember me, O my God, for good.

IV. Book Summary: Despite God returning his people to the land and enabling them to successfully rebuild Jerusalem’s temple and surrounding walls, Israel remains in exilic slavery and fails to faithfully obey the terms of the covenant, thus showing their need for the transforming work of the Messiah after the exile is over.

V. Guided Reading of Ezra-Nehemiah

A. Key Chapters: Ezra 7, 9; Neh. 8–9

B. Questions:

1. What language other than Hebrew is found in Ezra, and in what contexts do we find it?
2. What is intriguing about the way Chronicles ends and Ezra-Nehemiah begins? What does this suggest about the authorship and/or compositional history of these two books?
3. What great event is portrayed in the first four verses of Ezra-Nehemiah? According to Ezra 3:8–9, who were the first two leaders of the return to Jerusalem, what were their vocations, and what was their first job?
4. According to Ezra 7, why was “the good hand of . . . God” upon Ezra? See also Ezra 8:21.
5. What are the vocations of Ezra and Nehemiah? Summarize in a single sentence the mission of each as portrayed in the book.
6. “For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.” Who prayed these words?
7. ESSAY: How should Christians reconcile the calls in both Ezra and Nehemiah for the community to divorce their pagan spouses (Ezra 9–10, esp. 10:11; Neh. 13:23–21), especially in light of Paul and Peter’s apparent statements to the contrary in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 and 1 Peter 3:1–2?