

WHAT  
THE **OLD**  
**TESTAMENT**

AUTHORS REALLY  
CARED ABOUT

A **SURVEY** of Jesus' Bible

**JASON S. DEROUCHIE**

E D I T O R

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*What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible*

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## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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### Who?

Ancient Jewish tradition considered Ezra-Nehemiah a single book and posited that the priest-scribe Ezra was the author of both this volume and Chronicles. These two documents may indeed be connected because the closing verses of Chronicles are roughly the same as the opening verses of Ezra-Nehemiah, and the books contain similar themes and emphases. That Ezra had his hand in composing the book is clear from the first-person perspective found throughout his “memoirs” (Ezra 7:27–9:15; cf. Neh. 8–10). However, the fact that Nehemiah the governor also has first-person narrative (Neh. 1:1–7:73; 12:27–13:31) renders the issue of final authorship unclear. More recent scholars have argued that the author-editor of Ezra-Nehemiah is anonymous and not the same as that of Chronicles. They have also asserted that, in addition to his own original narrative, this unnamed author included the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah and other primary source material, such as letters and official documents.

### When?

The events recorded in this book span almost a century, running from around 538 B.C. when Cyrus decreed that the Jewish exiles could return to the Promised Land, through the return under Ezra just after Esther (458 B.C.), and into the governorship of Nehemiah, which began in 444 B.C. The latter two figures, whose lives most likely overlapped with that of the prophet Malachi, both ministered during the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes I (also known as Longimanus, 464–424 B.C.). The final form of this literary work could be dated to around 400 B.C.

### Where?

Both the author and audience of Ezra-Nehemiah were located in Judah. Most of the events recorded took place in Jerusalem and its surroundings, along with a few that are set in Persia.

### Why?

Some of the Jews who returned to the Promised Land after the Babylonian exile had experienced trauma, having witnessed the defeat and destruction of their homeland, capital, and temple and having been taken forcibly into exile. Others had been born in exile, under the burden of God’s judgment due to the nation’s persistent sin. The people of Israel had now been permitted to return to Judah, but they remained slaves (Ezra 9:8–9; Neh. 9:36–37), and they faced opposition, challenges, and questions. Had God forsaken them forever? Were they still the chosen people of God? Were God’s promises to them still good?

The author of Ezra-Nehemiah wrote both to encourage and to challenge his readers. To encourage, he assured them that God was still their God and on their side, that his covenant relationship with them was still in effect, and that his promises would still be fulfilled. To challenge, he stressed their need to repent of their ongoing sinfulness, to recommit themselves to their covenant responsibilities, and to faithfully obey and worship God according to his standards.

CHAPTER  
24

# EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Daryl Aaron and  
Jason S. DeRouchie

## Carefully Crafted Verses from Ezra-Nehemiah

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 (Ezra 7:9–10).

“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” (Ezra 8:22).

“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 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 all the people went their way ... to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them (Neh. 8:8, 12).

## THE AUTHOR OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH ...

- Stressed *God's sovereignty and faithfulness* in restoring his people to the land.
- Acknowledged *the threat of opposition* to God's people and purposes.
- Emphasized *the need for spiritual, social, and physical boundaries*.
- Called for *covenant loyalty* through conformity to the law of Moses.
- Demonstrated how *God favors those who dependently seek him*.

### **The Author of Ezra-Nehemiah Stressed God's Sovereignty and Faithfulness in Restoring His People to the Land**

The Babylonians exiled the Judeans in three increasingly devastating deportations, climaxing in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (605, 597, 586 B.C.). Historically, Ezra-Nehemiah is about the three Babylonian exiles put in reverse, for the book tells of three returns to Jerusalem, all focused on the reconstitution of worship and the restoration of life in the Promised Land (538, 458, 444 B.C.).

#### **Figure 24.1. Ezra-Nehemiah at a Glance**

The First Return to Jerusalem: The Temple Rebuilt (Ezra 1–6)

The Second Return to Jerusalem: The People Revived (Ezra 7–10)

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1–7)

Nehemiah and Ezra Revive the People (Neh. 8–13)

Theologically, Ezra-Nehemiah addressed the concern of these returnees: Would God fulfill his promises to them and restore them wholly as his people? The unified testimony of the book is that the “LORD God of heaven” is indeed “the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments” (Neh. 1:5; cf. 9:32; Deut. 7:9, 21). In context, this reference provides the basis for Nehemiah’s request for divine help. Two elements in the statement are clear: (1) Yahweh is sovereign as the “God of heaven,” and (2) Yahweh is faithful to his covenant promises and people.

#### ***Yahweh’s Sovereignty in the Restoration***

From start to finish, the book testifies to Yahweh’s sovereign control over the Jews’ reestablishment in Judah. The book opens: “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, *the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus*” (Ezra 1:1). The text is further explicit that God directed not only Cyrus but also two other Persian kings to encourage the Jewish return to Jerusalem and to support the building projects and worship there (6:14, 22; 7:27–28), and God was also the one who blessed his people, moving, enabling, and protecting them through the entire process of initial restoration to the land (1:5; 5:5; Neh. 2:12; 6:16; 7:5). Yahweh’s governing oversight was stressed in the recurring statement “the hand of the

Figure 24.2. The Three Returns from Exile

	Return 1	Return 2	Return 3
<b>Bible Reference</b>	Ezra 1–6	Ezra 7–10	Nehemiah 1–13
<b>Date Initiated</b>	538 B.C.	458 B.C.	444 B.C.
<b>Persian King</b>	Cyrus II	Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes I
<b>Jewish Leaders</b>	Sheshbazzar and then Zerubbabel as governors; Jeshua as priest	Ezra as priest	Nehemiah as governor
<b>Prophets</b>	Haggai and Zechariah	Malachi?	
<b>Elements of the Decree</b>	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).
<b>Number Returning</b>	42,360 (returnees) + <u>7,337</u> (servants) 49,697 (Ezra 3:64–65)	1,496 (men) 38 (Levites) + <u>220</u> (helpers) 1,754 (Ezra 8:1–20)	Unknown
<b>Events Accomplished</b>	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 interfaith marriage; communal confession of sins.	Jerusalem temple and city wall and gates rebuilt in fifty-two days, despite enemy opposition; problems with oppression of the poor and interfaith 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.

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LORD was on him/me/us” (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:8, 18), and this same sovereign rule was testified to in the title “the God of heaven” that both Persian kings and Jewish leaders employed (Ezra 1:2; 6:9–10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh. 1:5).



“By [Marduk’s] exalted [word], ... I returned the (images of) the gods to the sacred centers [on the other side of] the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned (to them) their dwellings” (The Cyrus Cylinder). *The Cyrus Cylinder provides King Cyrus of Persia’s own account of his rise to power and of his restoration policy for all exiles (from the British Museum; photo by William L. Krewson; translation from COS 315.28–36; cf. ANET 316). Significantly, what Cyrus attributes to “Marduk, the great lord of the gods” on the cylinder, the Bible rightly attributes to “the LORD, the God of heaven” (Ezra 1:2; cf. 2 Chron. 36:23).*

### ***Yahweh’s Faithfulness in Restoring to the Land***

This God, who governs all, would be faithful to his covenant promises. Nehemiah’s confidence in this is stressed in his echo of God’s words through Moses: “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” (Neh. 1:8–9; cf. Lev. 26:33, 39–42; Deut. 4:25–31; 28:64; 30:2, 3).

Israel's prophets confirmed this promise repeatedly, proclaiming in advance even specific details like the name of Cyrus as the instrument of initial restoration and the specific timeframe of "seventy years" (see Ezra 1:1):

- "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" (Jer. 29:10; cf. 25:12–13).
- "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, ... 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.'... He shall build my city and set my exiles free" (Isa. 44:24, 28; 45:13).

Clearly, part of the purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah was to show how Yahweh was accomplishing what he promised to do.

### ***Yahweh's Faithfulness in Restoring His People***

Another way Ezra-Nehemiah calls attention to God's covenant faithfulness is by establishing the returnees' continuity with pre-exilic Israel and thus the promises given them. What God had started in the past, he was continuing with the post-exilic community. Their link with the earlier generations is highlighted through the numerous genealogies and lists of people found in the book (Ezra 2:3–70; 8:1–14; Neh. 7:6–73; 11:3–19; 12:1–26). It is also indicated by the *re*-building of the temple and walls of Jerusalem; the Jewish *re*-population of Jerusalem; the *re*-establishment of the priesthood and temple worship; and the *re*-focusing on the Law, holy days, and covenant responsibilities of the people of God.

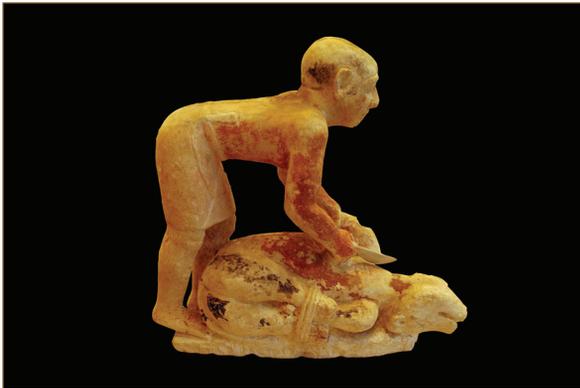
God continues to be faithful to his covenant promises to ethnic Jews and Gentiles who are in a (new) covenant relationship with him through faith in Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:7–13; cf. Gal. 3:27–29).

### ***The Author of Ezra-Nehemiah Acknowledged the Threat of Opposition to God's People and Purposes***

Yahweh sovereignly works to accomplish his purposes, but opposition is always to be expected in this life due to the presence of those who hate God and his people. As Jesus asserted, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). And

We as Christians should still expect opposition, and we should deal with it as Nehemiah did: trusting God for protection and deliverance and faithfully continuing to do the work that God has called us to do.

as Paul noted, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22; cf. 2 Tim. 3:12). This reality is certainly apparent in Ezra-Nehemiah, where we are told that many peoples of the land arose to keep the Jewish remnant from being reestablished in Jerusalem and its surroundings. There was hostility against rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4:1–24) and enmity against reconstructing Jerusalem’s walls (Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:1–23; 6:1–14). The opposition included insincere requests at cooperation (Ezra 4:1–3), intimidation (4:4; Neh. 6:9), attempts to dissuade the Persian kings (Ezra 4:6–16), ridicule (Neh. 2:19; 4:1–3), and threats of physical violence against workers and leaders (4:8–15; 6:1–4). In response, the Jewish leaders depended upon and appealed to God to protect them (2:20; 4:4–5; 6:9, 14), and they took action, whether through restarting the temple rebuilding in defiance of the king’s unjust order (Ezra 5:1–2) or in calling the workers to defend themselves in battle if they were attacked (Neh. 4:13–23). These two aspects come together in Nehemiah 4:14, 20 where Nehemiah said to his people: “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.... Our God will fight for us.”



“And they offered great sacrifices that day [Jerusalem’s walls were completed] and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away” (Neh. 12:43). *An image of an Egyptian priest slaughtering a calf (from the Oriental Institute, USA).*

### **The Author of Ezra-Nehemiah Emphasized the Need for Spiritual, Social, and Physical Boundaries**

Israel’s ability to serve as a channel of blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3) was always contingent on their remaining true to God and uninfluenced by the evil of the world. “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (Lev. 20:26). As Israel stood distinct from the pagans, heeding God’s voice and keeping his covenant, they would in turn operate as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, directing the nations to the unique worth of Yahweh (Exod. 19:5–6; cf. Deut. 4:5–8; 1 Peter 2:9). This expectation remained for Israel even after the exile. As the “remnant” (Ezra 9:8–15; Neh. 1:3), the “holy race” (Ezra 9:2), they needed to maintain spiritual, social, and even physical boundaries from the pagan influences borne by the other inhabitants of the land (4:3; Neh. 2:20; 9:2; 10:28; 13:1–3).

In Ezra-Nehemiah, this stress shows up most directly in the recurring problem of inter-faith marriage—an issue confronted by both Ezra (Ezra 9–10) and Nehemiah (Neh. 13:1–3, 23–27). Earlier through Moses, God had warned parents not to allow their children to marry nonbelievers. The



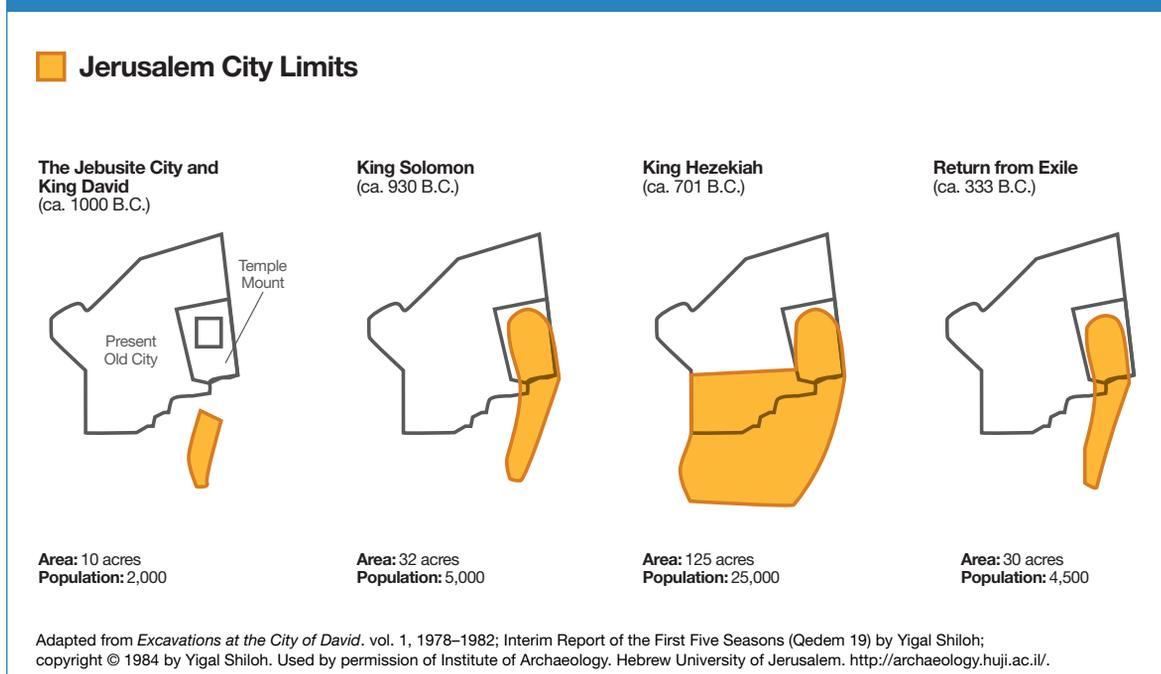
“I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire” (Neh. 2:13). *City of David excavations northward up the Kidron Valley to the temple mount (left) and Mount of Olives (right).*

reason was clear (Deut. 7:4): “They would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.” Israel’s history was dotted with failure related to this issue, and the results were always destructive (Judg. 3:5–8; 1 Kings 11:1–13; 16:30–33; cf. 2 Kings 17:8; 21:9). How then could the returnees, the “holy race,” be found to have “mixed itself with the peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:2)? Was pleasing God not important to them? Did they not care about seeing him exalted in the sight of others? Were they so uninterested in restoration and life that they would choose a path toward eternal death? On this basis, Ezra charged them: “Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:11).

The importance of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem symbolized in a physical way the necessity for these boundaries (Neh. 1:3; 2:3). The walls not only were protection from outside threats but also signified the

If Ezra were here today, he would charge all Christians who are single to be vigilant in their pursuit of God with respect to their relationships.

**Figure 24.3. Jerusalem’s Area and Population Through the Ages**



uniqueness and separateness of those within (7:3–4). The city of Jerusalem had become an important symbol of Israel’s identity as the people of God. Even in exile, their identity had been tied to the Holy City (Ps. 126:1–2; cf. Dan. 6:10), for it was the location God chose to make his presence dwell (Ezra 1:4; 6:12; Neh. 9:1).

Social and physical boundaries were important in that they also provided a spiritual boundary. Unhealthy intermingling with pagans inevitably leads to spiritual defection or idolatry. This is why God clearly and repeatedly commanded Israel not to do it (Exod. 34:12–16; Deut. 7:1–6; cf. Ezra 9:10–12).

As he did with Old Testament Israel, God calls for Christians to be set apart, to live in a way that is distinctively God-like (1 Peter 1:14–16; cf. 1 Thess. 4:3–8).

### **The Author of Ezra-Nehemiah Called for *Covenant Loyalty* Through Conformity to the Law of Moses**

God was faithful to his covenant promises, but he continued to expect his people to be faithful to their covenant responsibilities, specifically in keeping the instructions given through Moses. Many of the exiles who returned clearly understood that their captivity was due to their covenant violation: “We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses” (Neh. 1:7; cf. 9:13–17, 26–30; Ezra 9:6–15). They saw the return as a “brief moment” of divine favor—“a little reviving in our slavery” (Ezra 9:8), and what they needed was to dependently follow God in the present rather than to spurn his grace by rebelling like their ancestors had.

Such a revived covenant loyalty necessitated reprioritizing their lives around God’s Word—a feature that came to characterize post-exilic Judaism. In short, from Ezra onward, the Jews came to be regarded as a “people of the Book.” Ezra himself played an important role in this because he was “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” who “had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (7:6, 10). This devotion can be seen in Nehemiah 8 as he and his fellow-Levites publicly “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). The result was that “all the people went their way ... to make great rejoicing, because they understood the words that were declared to them” (8:12).

Ezra’s own life is a portrait of Paul’s call, “Do you your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

One way Ezra-Nehemiah emphasized the revitalized focus on the centrality of Scripture was through highlighting the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstating of the Levitical priesthood, the sacrifices, and the holy days (Ezra 3:2–10; 6:13–22; Neh. 8:13–18; 12:44–47; 13:4–9, 15–22, 28–31). These ceremonial or cultic laws helped distinguish Israel from the nations and provided parables of more fundamental truths about God and relating to him (see Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 9:11–14). Along with these more symbolic laws, God also called Israel to keep the various criminal, case, family, and compassion laws—all of which displayed love for God and neighbor in the community (see Fig. 3.4). The issues highlighted most directly in this book were the care of the poor and Levites (Neh. 5:1–13;



“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” (Ezra 7:10).  
A Jewish scribe writing (photo by Kim Guess).

13:10–14); the keeping of the Sabbath (13:15–22); and the purity of marriage, the community, the priesthood, and the temple (Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:1–9, 23–31).

### **The Author of Ezra-Nehemiah Demonstrated How *God Favors Those Who Dependently Seek Him***

Prayer expressed through confession and covenant renewal plays a central role in the events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah. Whether the prayers are short (Neh. 2:4; 4:4–5; 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31) or long (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh. 1:5–11; 9:5–38), their content demonstrates great humility and dependent longing for God.

For example, Ezra pleaded with God on behalf of the returnees, who had engaged in sinful behavior (Ezra 9:13–15), and his cries were accompanied with corporate weeping and brokenness (10:1) and the recognition that the assembly had “broken faith with our God” (10:2). The people were convinced, however, that “even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this” (10:2), and they committed to Yahweh through covenant to separate themselves from those peoples that stood as obstacles in their pursuit of living for God (10:3).

Why were they convinced that there was still hope? The reason is made clear in the record of a similar commitment that was formalized years later under the leadership of Nehemiah (Neh. 9:38). Caught up in the midst of an extended revival centered on the reading and exposition of God’s Word, the people gathered together for a solemn assembly, to hear from the Book of the Law and to confess their sins and worship Yahweh God (9:1–3). Nehemiah 9:5–37 is an amazing prayer of covenant renewal. In it the



“In your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.... You have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly” (Neh. 9:31, 33). *Men praying at the Western Wall, Jerusalem.*

returnees recognized Yahweh as the only true God and as the one who entered into a covenant relationship with them; they affirmed their own covenant failures throughout history and praised God's faithfulness to them despite their sin. With a frequency paralleled only in Hosea 1–2, Nehemiah 9 glories in the “mercy-filled” nature of God's character (9:17, 19, 27–28, 31; cf. Exod. 24:6), and it is on this basis that the repentant returnees pleaded to “the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love” (Neh. 9:32), to help them in their present need. There was hope, because God was merciful! As such, before God and with one another they entered “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 the LORD our God and his rules and his statutes” (10:29).

Our inward propensity to sin is *always* challenging our desire to obey God. Therefore renewal is *always* necessary.

As one overviews the prayers in the book, a number of features are common. The people's humility and dependence flowed from their confession of sin (Ezra 9:6–7, 10–11, 15; Neh. 1:6–7; 9:16–31) and from their recognition of (1) God's faithfulness to his covenant promises (Ezra 9:9; Neh. 1:5; 9:8); (2) his grace and mercy (Ezra 9:8–9, 13; Neh. 9:17, 31), which had flowed out in compassion, patience, forgiveness, and deliverance (Neh. 9:17, 19, 27–28, 30); and (3) his ever-present provision and protection (9:9–15; 20–21, 25). While God's justness in dealing with their sinfulness was freely acknowledged (Ezra 9:7, 13; Neh. 9:27–28, 30, 33), his people appealed to him on the basis of his faithful and merciful character (Neh. 1:8–9; 9:32) to graciously grant success (1:11; 5:19; 6:9; 13:14, 22, 31) and protection (4:4–5, 9; 6:14). The foundational truth that governs such pleas is this: “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” (Ezra 8:22; cf. 7:6, 9–10, 28; Neh. 2:8, 18).

The prayers in Ezra-Nehemiah show us what prayers ought to be—human expressions of humility and insufficiency that are both dependent on and confident in God's grace and all-sufficiency.

## Conclusion

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah ends with a brief plea: “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Neh. 13:31). This small sentence captures the heart of Israel's hopes for restoration. Only where God remembers for good will the kingdom be established.

Unfortunately, the Jews' desire to be obedient to God's laws was continually challenged by their inward propensity to sin. Even after the formal

covenant renewal highlighted in Nehemiah 8–10, the problems of interfaith marriage continued to arise, as did numerous other challenges regarding purity and holiness (ch. 13). While restoration was initialized, Israel’s enslavement continued—not only to Persia (Ezra 9:8–9; Neh. 9:36–37) but also to sin. Yet in light of God’s sustained mercies (Neh. 9:31), hope remained (Ezra 10:2), as Israel longed for the more complete, ultimate restoration of God’s kingdom.

### KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS FOR REVIEW

Ezra and Nehemiah’s memoirs

Persia

Exile

Post-exile

Three returns from exile

Sovereignty

Faithfulness

Opposition

Boundaries

Remnant

Interfaith marriage

People of the Book

Prayer

Covenant renewal

Mercy

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