

# Ezra—Nehemiah—God Restores and Reforms

BY PASTOR JASON SNIDER

## I. Introduction

- A. If I were planning a vacation, I first begin with the map to help me think about where I'm going and what I would like to do on the journey. Different routes bring about possibilities of seeing places we haven't visited before. For example, we went to Boston a few years ago which was a fabulous trip but we also made some stops along the way such as Lake Erie and Niagara Falls.
- B. All of this was planned ahead of time because we explored the map. That vacation was probably my favorite that we've ever taken and in part it was due to the careful planning. In other words, we squeezed every ounce of time we had to get the very most out of that trip.
- C. I hope to do the same for us here. I want us to take a look at the book of Ezra-Nehemiah and map out our journey through it. I want all of us to get the most out of it and not waste any of our time.
- D. This is an important journey. While I've entitled this new fall sermon series—God's Restoration and Reformation—that doesn't mean there aren't other important things to see on this journey. The title emphasizes what I believe is the main thrust of the book—God's desire and sovereignty to rescue, restore and reform his people.
  - 1. So, let's not come at this sermon series to merely learn *about* this very important period of redemptive history. Let's learn *from* from this amazing text.
  - 2. It's likely that you have never heard any sermons from Ezra-Nehemiah unless the pastors were hoping to persuade you to begin a building project. I'm not preaching through this book so that we will build some building. I love the one we have.
  - 3. However, my hope is that we will see God's plan for restoration and renewal in us as a church and build us up in the most holy faith.
  - 4. Indeed, Christ is building his church and the gates of hell shall not prevail.
- E. And finally, what is our destination on this trip? As is every week—faith in Christ.

## II. Main Point

- A. Again, I believe the main point of Ezra-Nehemiah is the God who restores and reforms his people for his glory.
  - 1. All of this is part of the process of redemptive history.
  - 2. If I could point out the obvious—the temple they rebuild will be torn down again. Yes, they were sent back to do this and they should do this because trusting and obeying the Lord is the point.
    - a) Are not we in a similar situation? Have we been gathered into heaven—the new Jerusalem? Will not kingdoms rise and fall, elections won and lost, good laws made and abandoned?
    - b) They lived in a very difficult time—much more difficult than we are experiencing. Over the span of years this book covers, there are not only many different rulers who come in and out of power but there are different nations that take over the rule of those nations.
      - (1) And yet, they are called to trust the Lord and obey his word no matter who is in office or what their rulers decree.
      - (2) They have the word of God and the hope of his sovereign rule over all.
      - (3) We have the hope of the gospel and the resurrection. Let's live in light of those realities.

## III. Outline

- A. Setting the Context—From Exile to Jerusalem
- B. Ezra-Nehemiah—The God Who Restores and purifies the Remnant

## IV. Exposition

- A. It will help us greatly to understand the context before we dive into Ezra-Nehemiah.
  - 1. The simple answer is—they are coming out of exile in Babylon and returning to the land and particularly to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the temple.
    - a) At two important moments—after the covenant made at Mt. Sinai and before they enter the promised land after 40 years of wilderness wandering—God warned the people through Moses in Lev. 26 and Deut. 4 and 28 that if they did not keep the terms of the covenant, he would “scatter them among the nations.”

- i) Indeed, Nehemiah quotes this in his prayer in Nehemiah 1:8-9 <sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, <sup>9</sup> 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.'
- (2) They knew this day would come if they persisted in breaking God's covenant. The blessings and curses could not have been more clear.
  - (a) Even after settling in the land, Joshua said the same thing before he died at the end of Joshua.
  - (b) He even seemed to expect it because the people had already proven to be a stiff-necked people.
  - (c) However, in all those warnings, God said if you will repent I will forgive you and heal your land.
- b) They found themselves in exile due to the consequences of their prolonged unfaithfulness. If anyone looked at this outcome and thought—you know God is so harsh and quick-tempered—they have somehow missed the years and years of God's patience as he sent prophet after prophet to warn them.
  - (1) When Jeremiah is sent to warn the people, it's too late. They are going into exile no matter what. In fact, his instructions are to give yourself up to them.
  - (2) The theme of Jeremiah is—you need a new heart.
  - (3) The new covenant was in view at this point but something very different needed to occur before God could remember their sins no more.
- 2. As you probably remember, the story of Daniel described those taken from Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon.
  - a) He took not only the people but he stripped the temple of all its gold and utensils.
  - b) That story was a picture of what life was like in exile but also a picture of God's sustaining grace for those who trusted him even in exile, like Daniel and his three friends.
  - c) However, through Jeremiah and Daniel, the promise was clear—you will be in exile for 70 years.
    - (1) Only God can make promises like that and fulfill them.
    - (2) He promised to scatter them and he promised to gather them and return them to the land.
    - (3) That was the expectation in Daniel. Indeed, it was the promise they lived by. It's hard to live in the present without future hope.
  - d) But the book of Daniel only unpacked the promise. We know why they were in exile, we knew they would return in 70 years, but we didn't know *how* that would happen.
    - (1) Let me see if I can help us relate this idea—imagine that the government gets sick and tired of Christians and they are moved by God to come here on a Sunday and take us all into custody because we have remained unfaithful to God. And by the way, the government of the US has been taken over by Russia. They remove the stained glass windows, the pulpit and pews, and they ransack the building by tearing down the beautiful stone walls down.
      - (a) The stones are scattered about and the stained glass windows among other things are taken with them.
      - (b) All of us are transported to Russia and the salvaged trophies of our building are put in their treasury.
        - i) Yet, some 70 years later, a new leader emerges and Russia falls to the hands of an unlikely king from North Korea.
          - (1) How would you ever expect a leader from North Korea to show Christians some kind of favor?
        - ii) You soon get word that the new regime has declared that you will return to your homeland and he's returning the stain glass windows and he will also pay for the rebuilding of our church building.
          - (1) Would we not say, "Our God has done this!"

- iii) This isn't a new religious liberty stunt but rather the new king wants all gods on his side, therefore he sends us back to rebuild.
    - iv) Would that not be an amazing miracle?
    - v) That's sort of like what happened to the exiles—God's people.
  - 3. The Lord never gave up on his people even though they had given up on him.
    - a) However, there were those in exile who did not lose hope of returning home.
    - b) If I could compare this to Egypt briefly:
      - (1) Jacob's family was 70 in all but when they left, they were well over a million.
        - (a) Adversity did not diminish them in number but they greatly increased.
        - (b) When they left, they were given all kinds of gold and silver—as it says, they plundered the Egyptians.
      - (2) When God's people go into exile because of sin, they are many in number but only a small remnant returned.
        - (a) They too are given what they need to rebuild the temple.
        - (b) This was the new exodus—a new start. Would it be different this time?
- B. That turns us to God's work of grace to rescue his people again here in Ezra. The first 6 chapters of Ezra describe God's restoration of his people to the land.
  - 1. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah covers a span of about 100 years—539 to 433. Though you can read through both, Ezra and Nehemiah, in less than 2 hours, the amount of time from the decree to the dedication of the wall takes a long time.
    - a) Change takes time.
  - 2. The remnant returns around 539 B.C. when Cyrus ordered the decree. So the first wave of exiles make the journey back to the land.
    - a) What is not so obvious, is the length of time between when Zerubbabel leads God's people back and the second wave of exiles who come with Ezra in chapter 7 is about 50 years later.
      - (1) I mention these dates to highlight the patience of God and the slowness of the people.
      - (2) They first rebuild the altar to which the people begin offering sacrifices again.
      - (3) The foundation is started but troubles arise and the work stops.
      - (4) That's when God sends Haggai and Zechariah to tell them to get back to work.
        - (a) In fact, there's a famine in the land because the people are not obeying the Lord.
        - (b) They do not seem to understand that it was because of their disobedience but Haggai makes it clear to them.
        - (c) Also during this 50 year pause, the events of the book of Esther likely happen.
      - (5) There's much the people need to change and it was more than just rebuilding the temple.
        - (a) Malachi also warns the people about their pitiful sacrifices and robbing God of his tithes.
  - 3. So the remnant is restored to the land but how did it happen? Yes...Cyrus made the decree but why would someone like a ruler from North Korea do something like that?
    - a) The answer lies in the reoccurring theme of God's mighty hand working behind the scenes to accomplish his promises and purposes.
      - (1) It was not out of the goodness of Cyrus's heart that he did this. Why did he do it?
        - (a) Ezra 1:1-2 <sup>1</sup> 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 king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: <sup>2</sup> "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.
      - (2) This isn't the only example in chapters 1-6.
        - (a) There in again in verse 5 it says—Ezra 1:5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.
          - i) So, those who returned did so because God stirred up their heart to do so.
      - (3) In chapter 3 the people praise the Lord for his steadfast love when the foundation is laid.

- (a) Ezra 3:11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
  - (b) They understand that it is because the Lord’s blessing and he is working through them to accomplish this work.
- (4) When they shrunk back in fear and attended merely to themselves, God sent Haggai and Zechariah in chapter 5.
  - (a) They started the work back because the prophets of God were with them (5:2).
- (5) When they are threatened again, they continue because in 5:5 the eye of their God was on the elders, and they did not stop.
- (6) Again, a new king is in power. Will he decree that the work to be stopped?
  - (a) Instead of making a new decree, the new King—Darius—searches the documents and finds Cyrus’s decree.
  - (b) God moves his heart to stand behind that decree and he makes those governors who are whining about it to now pay for the temple to be rebuilt.
    - i) Ha! What a turn of events there in chapter 6.
    - ii) No matter who is ruling in Susa, God is provides and protects his people.
- (7) In chapter 8, God is directing the hearts and hands of the people as they work in 8:18.
- (8) He protects them from enemies in 8:31.
- (9) Later the people are found to be breaking God’s law but what does that reveal about how God is?
  - (a) They find him to be a just God who doesn’t overlook sin. But he’s also compassionate and gracious. He shows them steadfast love—covenant love and does not abandon them.
- 4. We will also learn a lot about the people too.
  - a) Throughout this book, the people are found to have been in some very serious sin.
    - (1) Intermarriage with foreign women. Even the priests and Levites had done this.
      - (a) This was a problem because those they had married still worshiped their gods and did things that were an abomination to the God of Israel.
    - (2) The priesthood isn’t a purified priesthood.
    - (3) They break the Sabbath. They fail to keep the festivals.
    - (4) They commit usury against their own people.
    - (5) When Nehemiah goes back to the king temporarily, he finds the people is chaos when he returns.
  - b) What they need is the Word of God. Ezra is sent to teach them the law.
    - (1) Not only were they to be restored to the land promised to them but their relationship with God is restored through the Word of God.
      - (a) At the center of every renewal and revival or reformation is God’s Word.
      - (b) What happened in King Josiah’s day? Revival. Tearing down of the high places where they worshiped other gods. Why? Because they found the Book of the Law in the temple. They read it. They repented. God forgave them. They obeyed what he said through his Word and they were restored.
    - (2) At the center of the Protestant Reformation was the renewed interest in God’s Word.
  - c) We will make progress as a church insofar as we trust God through his words and gladly obey him.
  - d) With the renewed prominence of God’s Word in Ezra-Nehemiah comes confess of sin.
    - (1) This book is full of prayers of confession.
    - (2) And they do not merely stop there. They make it right. They put away their foreign wives and children.
    - (3) Over and over again, God is shown to be a merciful God who forgives his people when they repent.

- e) This renewal leads to worship among God's people.
  - (1) There's many scenes in this book where the people gather to worship, to hear the Word read, to stand for hours while being taught, to confess as they are drenched with rain and to praise the Lord their God.
  - (2) There's so much to learn about prayer in this amazing book too.
    - (a) At one point, Nehemiah who is the cupbearer for the king is confronted by King Artaxerxes about why he is sad. And being desperate for God's help in how to answer the king, it seems Nehemiah throws out this prayer in his mind, not audible to the king, for help and God answers.
- f) There's also lots of opposition from the outside.
  - (1) There were people who were not removed from the land. The poorest of the poor were left by Nebuchadnezzar and some of them cause some problems because they have occupied the land as they pleased.
  - (2) Since Persia is in power, the remnant does not have complete control over what they do.
    - (a) They have to submit to God and the ruling authorities.
    - (b) Some try to stop the work by telling on them to the king with things that are not completely true.
  - (3) But also, there's opposition from within.
    - (a) There are people willing to be paid to trick Nehemiah but he doesn't fall for it.
    - (b) They try to scare him many times and even try to get him to hide in the temple.
- g) Even under heavy opposition, the people work.
  - (1) Sometimes they work with a concrete trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.
- C. That's the road map of Ezra-Nehemiah. But let's end with something very important from this book—Nehemiah 13.
  - 1. The book doesn't end the way you might think or hope.
  - 2. In fact you aren't sure if exile is not on the horizon again.
  - 3. It seems there's a greater need but what will it be?
    - a) That need is the Messiah to come and establish the new covenant.
    - b) They build a wall but they need the dividing wall to be broken down not just literally but spiritual between them and God.
    - c) They need a perfect sacrifice to bring them to God.
    - d) They need lasting forgiveness and perfect righteousness.
    - e) They need God to be with them by his Holy Spirit and live by faith trusting and obeying him through his word.
  - 4. All of this leads them and us to our need for Jesus—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
    - a) If you confess your sins, God will forgive you but he will not heal your land. He will heal you.
    - b) The land you and I long for is the new Jerusalem. And it's coming someday—if you are in Jesus.