



“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”

Session 1: Intro & The First Return

June 4, 2024 6:30 PM

Opening Prayer

Father, as we embark on a journey this summer through the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, may you open our eyes to the lessons we can learn from these important faith figures, the struggles of your chosen people, and the rebuild of a once powerful nation. May we not just see these as moments in history, but opportunities to apply them to our faith journey with You – individually and as a congregation here at First Baptist Elon. Amen.

Opening Question...

Think of a time when you felt God calling you to do something and you acted on that prompting. What blessings did you experience as a result of your obedience?

A Little Background...

Following the rule of King Solomon, the nation of Israel divides into two kingdoms – the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (approximately 930 BC). Both Kingdoms begin falling away from true and proper worship of God. As a result, God allows foreign influences and eventually foreign powers to invade these Kingdoms and overthrow their rule.

In 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom of Judah is destroyed by Assyria and people assimilated into the surrounding cultures. Foreign people are relocated into the areas around Samaria, where they are taught to claim allegiance to the Lord while still worshiping their false gods as well.

In 587 BC, Judah is defeated by the Babylonian Empire. The capital city of Jerusalem and the Temple are turned into rubble. Many of the people are deported into exile to Babylon, where a remnant survives. These years of exile are foretold in the prophets, like Jeremiah.

In 538 BC, King Cyrus of Persia took control of the former Babylonian Empire and issues an edict that the exiled people may return to their homeland and rebuild their cities. This includes the remnant from Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple. This edict is described in Ezra Chapter 1.

Breakdown of the Books of Ezra & Nehemiah...

Originally the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah were seen as one book. Through history, they have been divided into two, focusing on the leadership of these two individuals. There is also a third individual that we also will mention, Zerubbabel, who leads part of the return, but is not a namesake for one of the Old Testament books.

The Breakdown of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah follow the return of the people of Judah (the Jewish people) to Jerusalem in three different waves.

First Return: Ezra Chapters 1 – 6

Approximate Year of this Return – 538 BC

Leader of this Return – Zerubbabel and others

Reconstruction Project During the Return – Rebuilding the Temple

Second Return: Ezra Chapters 7 – 10

Approximate Year of this Return – 458 BC

Leader of this Return – Ezra

Reconstruction Project During this Return – Renewing the Judean Community

Third Return: Nehemiah Chapters 1 – 7

Approximate Year of this Return – 445 BC

Leader of this Return – Nehemiah

Reconstruction Project During this Return – Restoring the walls of Jerusalem

Finale – Celebration: Nehemiah Chapters 8 – 12

The restored community celebrates the completion of the rebuilding work and renews its covenant with the Lord, in accordance with God's law.

A Look at Ezra and Nehemiah – the Leaders...

Ezra: Ezra was a priest and scribe who lived during the time of the Babylonian captivity. He was the son of Seraiah, the last high priest to serve in the First Temple, and a descendant of Hilkah, the high priest who had found a copy of the Book of the Law during the reign of Josiah. Ezra would have been unable to perform his functions as a priest during the Babylonian captivity, so instead he devoted his time to studying the Hebrew Scriptures and becoming a “teacher well versed in the Law of Moses”. It is believed that Ezra also wrote the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles and either compiled or edited the book of Nehemiah. Each of these works were likely composed from 500 to 450 BC.

Ezra was a student, an interpreter, and a spiritual leader for the Jewish people returning to Jerusalem. Ezra focused on restoring the spiritual foundation of the Jewish nation upon their return. His focus was on worship and the community. Ezra led the second group back in 458 BC. He helped organize the synagogue, founded the order of scribes, and helped settle the canon of Scripture and arrange the Psalms.

Nehemiah: Nehemiah was the respected leader, relentless in perfection, elder statesman of the Jewish remnant in Babylon. When we first meet him, Nehemiah is wearing the robe of royalty, serving as the king’s cupbearer of the Persian King Artaxerxes. When Nehemiah heard of a need, he prayed about it. His deep faith led God to soften the heart of the Persian King, allowing Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall around the city to protect the rebuilt Temple. Not only that, but the Persian King also blessed him with all the needed supplies and more that he would need. During which, he faced struggles of all kinds, but he succeeded.

Later, he returned to Jerusalem to teach the “forgotten” nation about the morality of faith. Not only a physical leader, but a spiritual leader as well. Nehemiah led the third wave of return to Jerusalem in 445 BC. The final chapters of Nehemiah and the book of Malachi likely represent the last of the Old Testament writings, both in terms of events and dates of composition.

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 1 (verses 1 – 11)

Vs. 1 - King Cyrus of Persia (559 – 530 BC) had already begun his rise to power in the Near East by unifying the Medes and Persians into a strong empire. As he conquered, he treated the inhabitants with mercy. Although not a servant of God, Cyrus was used by God to return the Jews to their homeland. This had been prophesied in Isaiah 44. (Daniel also has more to say about Cyrus). Jeremiah prophesied that the Jews would remain in captivity for 70 years. Scholars have approached this number in two ways – (1) from the initial captivity in 605 BC until the altar was rebuilt in 536 BC, or (2) from the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC until the exiles finished rebuilding in 516 BC.

Vs. 2 – 4 - **While** Cyrus was not a Jew, God used him to allow his plans to come to fruition. This proclamation allowed the Jews to work together to rebuild the Temple. Some did the actual building, while others focused on the supplies. This required teamwork. Each function was vital for success.

Vs. 5 - 6 – When Cyrus’s decree was made, this went out to all twelve tribes – including those in the North and the South. However, only the tribe of Judah and Benjamin in the South returned to rebuild the Temple. The ten tribes of the North had been so fractured and dispersed by Assyria, that many may have lost their true heritage. They were unwilling to see this vision. God moved the heart of the vision to return and rebuild. Major changes – rebuilds – begin on the inside! When the people’s attitudes and desires changed, God ended their punishment and gave them the opportunity to go home and try again. While some chose to return, some chose to stay in Babylon. Travel conditions were not ideal. Some Persian records show that many Jews in captivity had accumulated great wealth. Returning would have meant giving it all up. Their priorities were out of line. God was going to provide for all those who returned. And He did.

Vs. 7 – 8 – When the Temple was overrun by the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar ransacked the Temple and took most of the valuable possessions with him. Most of the kept items were solid gold, and Cyrus kindly returned them to the Jews for the Temple they would soon rebuild. Many scholars believe that Sheshbazzar was the Babylonian name for Zerubbabel, the leader of the first returning group to Jerusalem. Three specific reasons for

this: (1) both were called governors, (2) both laid the Temple foundation, and (3) Jews in exile were often given Babylonian names.

Vs. 9 – 11 – Every article of gold and silver was a witness to God’s protection and care for His returning people. Although many years had passed, God delivered the needed supplies back to His people for their return. What they needed was provided.

Follow Up Questions...

1. What do you think it means when Ezra writes that God “moved the heart of Cyrus” to issue the return? What are other examples of God “moving hearts”?
2. How did Cyrus demonstrate humility before God?
3. Why is it often difficult to step out in faith when you feel that God is leading you?
4. What do you learn personally from the example of the Jewish exiles who obeyed God’s call, make the journey back to Judah, and start work on the rebuilding of the Temple? What can we learn as a church?
5. What are some ways that God communicates His will to us today?

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 2

Verses 1 – 70 – Recount the individuals that returned to Jerusalem from the remnant families in Babylon.

Some Interesting Notes about the Three Returns...

First Return (538 BC) – 50,000 people – under King Cyrus of Persia – led by Zerubbabel

Second Return (458 BC) – 2,000 men and their families – under King Artaxerxes of Persia – led by Ezra

Third Return (445 BC) – Just a Small Group – under King Artaxerxes of Persia – led by Nehemiah

Follow Up Questions...

1. What purposes has God accomplished in your life by stirring up the hearts of people around you?

2. How has God stirred up your heart to serve Him?

Closing Prayer

Father, we want to be people who are willing to give up everything to follow You. Help us to see the most valuable things this world has to offer are worthless compared to the blessings you give to those who obey You. Open our ears to hear Your voice and help us to obey. Amen.

“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”

Session 2 – Temple Rebuilding & Opposition

Tuesday, July 11 6:30 PM

Ezra Chapters 3 & 4

Facebook Live
