

RESTORING THE BROKEN

A Study of Ezra and Nehemiah

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In 1313 BC, eight hundred years prior to the events recounted in Ezra, God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. At that time Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron, “Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me” (Ex. 12:31–32).

In the Promised Land, Israel was one united kingdom until about 930 BC, when, under the rule of Solomon’s son Rehoboam, it split into two distinct territories. The northern kingdom, which was made up of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel and whose capital city was Samaria, retained the name Israel. In 722 BC this northern kingdom was conquered by powerful Assyria, and her inhabitants were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire.

The southern kingdom, which was comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and whose capital was Jerusalem, remained largely independent for about 150 years. In 587 BC the Babylonians, who had defeated the Assyrians, invaded and conquered Judah, bringing fierce destruction. Unlike the Assyrians, who scattered those they conquered, the Babylonians forced Judah’s remaining inhabitants into exile in Babylon. The city wall in Jerusalem was reduced to rubble, and the temple, the very center of Judah’s religious and social identity, lay in ruins, its valuables plundered.

The exiles remained in Babylon until 538 BC, which is when the book of Ezra begins. Ezra is the story of the return of God’s people to the Promised Land almost 800 years after the exodus from Egypt. King Cyrus initiates a second exodus, this time from Babylon back to the Promised Land. This is where our study begins.

Read Ezra 1 and 2.

1. The book of Ezra begins with a proclamation by Cyrus king of Persia in 538 BC.
 - a. What does he proclaim as recorded in Ezra 1:2-3?
 - b. Who prompted this proclamation and why? (1:1; Jer. 25:11-12)
2. Read 2 Chronicles 36:14-21 to understand what happened 70 years before this opening chapter of Ezra.
 - a. Why did the Israelites go into exile?
 - b. What happened to the temple?

c. What do you observe about God's heart for his people in this passage?

3. What hope did the Israelites have as they lived in exile? (Jer. 29:1-14)
4. Many of the Jews living in exile were prosperous merchants, content with their lives (Jer. 29:4-7). Most would have had no memory of living in the kingdom of Judah. And a 1,000-mile trip through the desert might not have been very appealing. Which Jews decide to go to Jerusalem? (1:5)
5. How does God supply the needs of his people to carry out his plan? (1:4, 6)?

Give an example of when God has supplied your needs in ways you couldn't have imagined.

6. What did Nebuchadnezzar take that Cyrus wants to return to the Jews? (1:7-11) (Take note of the amount in verse 11 to get your mind around how much they would carry back to Jerusalem!)

What do all the details in verses 4-11 tell you about God's care for his covenant people?

7. Most of chapter 2 chronicles the family names of close to 50,000 people who took the long journey back to Jerusalem. What is it important to establish right away even before the work on the temple begins? (2:62-63¹)
8. What do the people do as soon as they arrive back in the Promised Land? (2:68-70)

“The importance of family records was twofold: for settling claims to property [which had been allotted to the Israelites by tribe], and for ensuring that the restored community had an unbroken descent from the original Israel.”² These family lines are also of importance because “from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah” (Rom. 9:5). We see this importance in the genealogy Matthew records in the opening of the New Testament (Mt. 1:1-17).

9. Skim back through Ezra 1-2 to remind yourself of the mysterious and surprising ways God worked to fulfill his promise to restore his people after 70 years in exile. In the fullness of time³ and in fulfillment of his many great promises, God would send his Son to this very land and to the temple which those who returned to the Promised Land were about to rebuild.

This study is about God restoring the broken: broken people, a broken temple, and broken walls. How do God’s creativity and power give you hope in the broken areas of your own life, your community, and your world?

This study has been adapted and expanded with permission from a study of the same name by Bridge Community Church, Phila., PA.

¹ The Urim and Thummim were a set of lots God had given to the high priest for making decisions. They had either “been lost in the exile, or... the ability to use them had been withdrawn.” Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 43.

² Kidner, 41.

³ Galatians 4:4