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Heart of Flesh

Weekly Bible Study Schedule

Tuesday, April 25, 7:00 AM in HHR #5
(breakfast provided)

Thursday, April 27, 7:00 AM in HHR #5
(casual conversations about the Bible and life)

**Capitol Commission is non-partisan and
non-denominational**

Ezra-Nehemiah Overview¹

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one unit. Long after the books were written they were separated into two works. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah tells the story of Israel's return to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives and restore God's covenant. The backstory is God's people were taken into exile by the Babylonians (586 BC) that had destroyed Jerusalem and demolished the temple. This book brings us into the story around 50 years later and informs that some of the exiled Israelites returned to Jerusalem and what happened when they rebuilt their lives.

Ezra-Nehemiah focuses on three central leaders.

➔ **Leader #1: Zerubbabel** – Ezra chapters 1-6

Zerubbabel, Governor of Judah, leads approximately 50,000 people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Cyrus, the king of Persia, is moved by God to decree: 'any Jew that wants to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, may go and do so'. In Jeremiah chapter 25, the prophet said that one day the exiles would return to Jerusalem. As he begins to rebuild the walls, he faces opposition by the people already living in Jerusalem that had not been exiled. Not all the Israelites were exiled.

Zerubbabel means "Planted in Babylon". He represents the generation born in captivity and he leads many Israelites back to Israel. Once settled, they rebuild the altar for animal sacrifices, and later, they rebuilt the temple. The expectancy was for the fiery cloud of God's presence to descend and fill the Temple. It didn't happen.

➔ **Leader #2: Ezra** – Ezra chapters 7-10

He is a leader among the exiled Israelites in Babylon. About 60 years later (458 BC) Ezra arrives in Israel to teach the Torah² and community. He is a Torah scholar and teacher so he is appointed by Artaxerxes, King of Persia, to lead another wave of Israelites back to Jerusalem, approximately 2000. Ezra seeks to bring spiritual and social renewal among the people. He faces opposition by the people already living in Jerusalem that had not been exiled.

➔ **Leader #3: Nehemiah** – Nehemiah chapters 1-7

Ezra is followed by Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. He is an Israelite official serving in the Persian government and when he hears about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls he prays and obtains permission from King Artaxerxes to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. The king provides resources and military protection and sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem. As he begins to rebuild the walls, he faces opposition by the people already living in Jerusalem that had not been exiled.

God Rules Over the Nations

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." (Romans 13:1)

Governing authorities over Israel during this period included the Babylonian empire, ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the Medes-Persian empire, ruled by King's Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes.

Kingdoms rise and they fall, leaders rise and they fall – God is in control of nations and leaders. Regardless of the leading authorities, God is leading and directing our todays and tomorrows.

When you're opposed for obeying God's Word and direction consider your battle goes beyond the natural setting of what you can see. You're in a spiritual battle, beyond the obvious. Therefore, the way to respond is with

² The first five books of the Hebrew Bible or what is more commonly known as the Old Testament. Included in the Torah are the biblical laws of Judaism.



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spiritual weapons like prayer, Scripture, faith, and a fixed focus on God.

In spite of all the opposition, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple of God and Ezra reestablished the worship and word of God.

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12)

God is not the God of the Israelites only; He is the God of all nations. The Edomites may have thought they were impregnable because they dwelt among the cliffs, high above the canyon floor, but God’s presence and power would bring them down from the cliffs where eagles soared. “Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the Lord” (Obadiah verse 4). It is true even today that the fate of nations is in the hand of God. He has determined “the allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). Even rulers who do not know or honor the Lord are subject to His will. He makes kingdoms rise and He makes kingdoms fall. “The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes” (Daniel 4:32).³

Spiritual Renewal

In Nehemiah chapters 8-12 Ezra and Nehemiah combined forces to bring about a spiritual renewal among the people. Among other actions, they read and taught the Torah with the people for 7 days. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) to remember God’s faithfulness in the Exodus and the wilderness journeys.

In Nehemiah chapter 13, he travels around the city to find that the people have not been fulfilling their covenant vows—the Temple was neglected. The people were working on the Sabbath day—dishonoring the law. And within the sight of Jerusalem’s walls people were setting up markets and working on the Sabbath. The book ends with Nehemiah praying that God would remember him.

Even though Israel is back in the land, the people’s spiritual state didn’t change from before the exile. Ezra

and Nehemiah did their best but all their political and social reform among the people didn’t address the core issues of their heart.

While the book ends on a down note it pushes you to discover what God is going to do to fulfill His great covenant promise.

Jeremiah 25 shines the light of hope toward the future.

- Future Messianic King – the line of King David (Isaiah 11, Hosea 3)
- God’s Presence will fill a new Temple— His presence will dwell with His people (Ezekiel 40-48; Zechariah 2)
- God’s kingdom will come to bless all people/nations— Fulfillment of Promise to Abraham (Isaiah 2; Zechariah 8)

Conclusion

The book is pointing out the same need highlighted by the prophet Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36: **God’s people need a transformation of their heart if they are ever going to love and obey their God.**

It’s more than 10 commandments written on stone; it’s more than returning to your spiritual roots; a transformed heart comes by way of entering a covenant relationship with Jesus.

Covenant Promise

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Prayer: “Lord, I ask you to remove my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh. Jesus come be my God and I will be your son/daughter.”

³ <https://dtarbet.wordpress.com>