

It's Never Too Late To Start Over

Ezra - Nehemiah

Dr. Steve Wagers

Let's take a moment to review, and retrace our steps by looking at the major events of the Old Testament that have already taken place.

GENESIS

Creation (Genesis 1-2)

Fall of Man (Genesis 3)

Flood (Genesis 7)

Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12: 3)

Jacob's Struggle (Genesis 32)

Joseph-A Type of Christ (Genesis 37-50)

EXODUS

Egyptian Bondage (430 Years)

10 Plagues (Exodus 8-13)

Crossing of Red Sea (Exodus 14)

10 Commandments (Exodus 20)

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-40)

LEVITICUS

Regulations for Worship-Sacrifices-Feasts in the Tabernacle

NUMBERS

People are Counted/Prepared for Movement into Canaan

DEUTERONOMY

Re-establishment of the Law of God (Deut. 5-27)

Moses Dies (Deut. 32-34)

JOSHUA

Joshua is New Leader (Joshua 1)

Rahab's Story of Salvation (Joshua 2)

Crossing of Jordan (Joshua 3)

Jericho Conquered (Joshua 6)

Promised Land Claimed (Joshua 10-24)

JUDGES

God Raises up Judges to Oversee Judicial Affairs

1-2 SAMUEL

Time of the Prophets Began

Israel Receives their First King—Saul (1 Sam. 9)

Israel Receives their Finest King—David (1 Sam. 16-2 Samuel)

1-2 KINGS

Reign of Solomon

Judah/Israel 39 Kings to Rule

Elijah (1 Kings)
Elisha (2 Kings)

1-2 CHRONICLES

Written after Babylonian Captivity
Remind Israel of their Significant History

Central THEME

EZRA

The first 2 remnants return home to Jerusalem, after 70 years of captivity, to rebuild their city and Temple.

NEHEMIAH

The final remnant returns home to finish rebuilding the walls of the city.

Central TRUTH

EZRA

“Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1: 3)

NEHEMIAH

“So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.” (Nehemiah 4: 6)

Central THRUST

Ezra/Nehemiah reminds us that God is to be first/foremost in our lives. We must return to God in repentance and re-establish communion and worship. Then, we must faithfully finish the work God has given to us, and it's never too late to start over.

Genesis: The Book of RUIN

Exodus: The Book of REDEMPTION

Leviticus: The Book of REGULATIONS

Numbers: The Book of READINESS

Deuteronomy: The Book of REMEMBRANCE

Joshua: The Book of REALIZATION

Judges: The Book of REGRET

Ruth: The Book of ROMANCE

1-2 Samuel: The Book(s) of ROYALTY

1-2 Kings: The Book(s) of REVOLT

1-2 Chronicles: The Book(s) of RENEWAL

Ezra/Nehemiah: The Book(s) of REBUILDING

I. The FIRST Remnant FASHIONS the Work

During the Babylonian captivity, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel told of the Jews restoration, and predicted that they would return to their own land and rebuild Jerusalem.

The 70 years of Babylonian captivity came and went when the Babylonian empire gave place to the Persian empire. In 538 B. C. God worked in the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia (modern-day Iran), and he issued a decree giving the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

The deportation, or exile, took place in 3 stages.
538 B.C.—1st remnant returns under Zerubbabel
458 B.C. – 2nd remnant returns under Ezra
445 B.C. – 3rd remnant returns under Nehemiah

There were 2 exodus in Israel's history.
1st exodus—From Egyptian captivity
2nd exodus—From Babylonian captivity

Both of these exiles and returns were prophetically foretold. The exodus from Egypt was foretold in Genesis 15: 13-14. The exodus from Babylon was foretold in Jeremiah 25: 11-12.

The book of Ezra opens with the 1st remnant returning under the leadership of Zerubbabel, as they begin to fashion the work of the city and Temple in Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel was a descendant of David, and the only royal person to return at this time. He was the political head of the remnant. Joshua, the high priest, was the religious leader. [1]

A. TRUTH of God FULFILLED

[1: 1-3] “Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, [2]Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. [3]Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.”

200 years before their return, God had prophesied, through the prophet Isaiah that this would happen. He even named Cyrus as the King he would use to make it happen.

“Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut. [2]I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron. [3]And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.” (Isaiah 45: 1-3)

Isn't that amazing? 200 years before God told how it would happen, and who would make it happen. 200 years later, it happen just like God had said to fulfill His promise.

B. HOUSE of God FURNISHED

[1: 7] "Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods."

God not allowed for His truth to be fulfilled, but for His house to be furnished. Cyrus gave Zerubbabel the golden vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple.

It's interesting that the very first thing they did was to build an altar.

[3: 3] "And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening."

Before they began rebuilding the Temple, they resurrected an altar. They built the altar on the original Temple site in the midst of the ruins.

Ray Stedman writes, "This is significant because the first act of a heart that really desires to restore fellowship, after a period of wandering, is to erect an altar to God. An altar is always the symbol of fellowship and ownership."

AS NT SAINTS, OUR HEARTS/LIVES ARE TO BE THE ALTAR.

C. PEOPLE of God FRUSTRATED

The work on the Temple had not proceeded far before the Samaritans became an obstacle.

[4: 4-5] "Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building. [5]And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia."

[4: 24] "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia."

The Samaritans asked to share in the work. But, they were refused because they had no lot in the work of God for they were not a part of the people of God.

UNHOLY PEOPLE HAVE NO PLACE IN HOLY THINGS

Once they were denied, they did everything they could do to hinder, harm, hurt and harass the builders. They even hired lawyers to misrepresent the Jews in the Persian courts.

As a result, the work on the Temple was halted for 15 years. During this time God sent 2 prophets, Haggai and Zechariah to encourage and exhort the people to resume the work.

D. WORK of God FINALIZED

The work had been halted for 15 years. Cyrus goes off the scene, but God uses Darius I to issue another decree to help the Jews finalize the work they had started.

[6: 7, 10-11] “Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place. [10]That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons. [11]Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.”

[6: 15, 22] “And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. [22]And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”

GOD ALWAYS FINISHES WHAT HE STARTED. SATAN MAY OPPOSE IT AND OPPRESS IT; HURT IT, HARM IT, HARASS IT, OR HINDER IT, BUT GOD WILL HELP IT.

538 B.C. — The 1st remnant returned
516 B.C. – The Temple was completed

II. The FURTHER Remnant FORTIFIES the Work

The Temple was completed, in 20 years, under Zerubbabel’s leadership. Although the Temple was complete, the order of worship, besides the erecting of the altar, was not what it ought to be.

458 B. C. Ezra, under a mandate from Artaxerxes, led the 2nd remnant of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem.

[7: 6-7] “This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. [7]And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.”

Henrietta Mears said, “Ezra was the Thomas Jefferson of his time, laying the constitutional foundations for the future. To him we are indebted for codifying Israel’s laws and the formation of her Scripture canon.”[3]

Ezra was a scribe, a priest of the family of Aaron. He was a man of the Word, and a man whose heart was committed to the worship of God among the people of God.

Between Ezra 6-7, 3 great world battles were fought (Salamis, Thermopylae and Marathon). Two great world leaders died, Confucius and Buddha.

A. Ezra's PASSION

[7: 10] "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."

Ezra's passion was to re-establish the priority of the Word and of worship. He made it his task to thoroughly teach the people the Word of God and to bring about important reforms.

Jesus gives the only true, clear-cut definition of worship in the entire Bible.
"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."
(John 4: 24)

2 Main Ingredients for True, Bible Worship:
SPIRIT of God
WORD of God

John Calvin said, "We owe to scripture the same reverence we owe to God. God cannot approve of anything that is not supported by His Word."

Today, people have become conditioned for anything other than the pure, unadulterated truth of God. Thus, whenever truth is preached, presented, or proclaimed, many view it as "hard, callous, agenda-minded preaching."

Someone has well said, "Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them."

The reason the Word must be the central focus of worship is because we cannot properly worship someone we do not know; and, we will not know the God of worship without knowing of the God of the Word.

B. Ezra's PRAYER

When Ezra returned to Jerusalem, even though the Temple had been rebuilt, he found things were worse than he had expected. The people had not returned to idolatry, but they had intermarried with pagans, and were doing what the pagans had taught them.

Ezra goes before God in one of the greatest prayers of the Bible.

[9: 5-7] "And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, [6] And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to

thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. [7] Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.”

Ezra prays, “God I am ashamed, and I even blush to have to confess the sin of our people to You. We have not gotten better, we have become worse.”

It seems prayer still upsets some people. When Minister Joe Wright was asked to open the new session of the Kansas Senate, everyone was expecting the usual generalities, but this is what they heard: "Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good,' but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self esteem. We have abused power and called it politics. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us, Oh, God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Amen!"

C. Ezra’s PREACHING

As Ezra was praying and weeping before God, a great congregation began to assemble. So, Ezra went from praying to preaching.

[10: 10-12] “And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. [11] Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. [12] Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.”

The Word of God brought a consciousness of the greatness of their sin. Great conviction fell upon them, and they responded with repentance. Ezra immediately led them into a sacred covenant with God to put away the strange wives they had acquired outside of God’s will.

[10: 17] “And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.”

We are called to divorce ourselves from anything that has to do with the world, the flesh and the devil.

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. [13] Let us walk honestly, as in the

day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. [14]But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” (Romans 13: 12-14)

III. The FINAL Remnant FINISHES the Work

538 B.C. – Zerubbabel leads 1st Remnant

516 B.C. – (22 years later)

Temple is Completed

458 B.C. – (80 years after 1st Remnant)

Ezra leads 2nd Remnant

Reestablishes the Word/Worship as Primary

445 B. C.—(93 years after 1st Remnant/13 years after Ezra)

Nehemiah returns to rebuild the walls of city

The Temple had been completed, but the gates/walls of the city remained in ruins. Thus, without the gates/walls, the city was open to attack. Nehemiah leads the charge.

A. The OPPORTUNITY that was ENCOUNTERED

Nehemiah was a “cupbearer” to King Artaxerxes. He tasted the food and drink for the King.

He received a report on the status of operations in Jerusalem, and immediately became burdened to be personally involved in finishing the task.

He receives:

PERMISSION (2: 6)

PROMOTION (2: 7)

PROVISION (2: 8)

PROTECTION (2: 9)

PROVIDENCE (2: 8c)

Nehemiah finally arrives in Jerusalem.

He COUNTS the COST

He CONFRONTS the CRITICS

He CONFIRMS the CALL

[2: 20] “The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”

God has given us a job to do. We are to enhance, enrich, and enlarge His kingdom. We have the opportunity of a lifetime. Nothing or no one can stop us. The God of heaven, He will prosper us.

“If God be for us, WHO can be against us!” (Romans 8: 31)

B. The OPPOSITION that was ENDURED

From the time he arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah was constantly opposed in the work of God. His two arch-rivals were Sanballat and Tobiah.

THE DEVIL WILL ALWAYS HAVE HIS WORKERS TO OPPOSE GOD'S WORK

1. Frustration

[4: 1-3] "But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. [2]And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? [3]Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall."

2. Fatigue

[4: 10] "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall."

The people had listened to the critics for too long, and had become weary, tired, and fatigued. Discouragers are often doubters, and doubters are often dissenters, and dissenters are often deserters.

IF YOU HAVE GROWN WEARY IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD, IT MAY BE BECAUSE YOU HAVE LISTENED TO THE DEVIL AND HIS DISCOURAGERS FOR TOO LONG.

3. Fraud

On 4 occasions, invitations were sent from Sanballat and Tobiah to Nehemiah for the purpose of meeting to discuss the situation.

[6: 2] "That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief."

NEHEMIAH SAID, "OH NO TO ONO!"

They couldn't discredit him, so they tried to destroy him. But, Nehemiah would not be distracted, detoured, or disillusioned. He would not come down from the work of God to entertain the wiles of the devil.

4. Fortitude

[6: 15] "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days."

This impossible task was accomplished in less than 2 months; only 52 days. When you take out 1 day a week for the Sabbath, as well as being slowed down, or stopped every time they were opposed, it is absolutely astounding and amazing.

C. The OUTCOME that was ENJOYED

1. Consecration(8-10)

REVIVAL

[8: 1] “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.”

REPENTANCE

[8: 9] “For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.”

[9: 1-2] “Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. [2]And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.”

RESOLVE

[9: 38] “And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.”

2. Dedication

[12: 43] “Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.”

Because of what God had through His people, in His people, by His people, and with His people, the shout of the people was heard in the ears of the pagans.

3. Confrontation

Nehemiah is gone for 1 year to go back and give a report to Artaxerxes. When he comes back to Jerusalem, things were worse than when he had left. Thus, Nehemiah begins to set things back in order.

[13: 30-31] “Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; [31]And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.”

Immediately and courageously, Nehemiah confronted the sin that contaminated the work of God. It was wrong, and the only solution for what is wrong is to make it right.

I heard a story about a local woman who moved back to Georgia to purchase the old homestead on which she grew up. Her mother and father had passed away, and the land had to be claimed. One of the first things she had to do was hire someone to come clean out the well that her father dug many years before. Over the years, a lot of stuff had accumulated in the well and made the water worthless. The crew got a good sized pile out and showed the woman so they could get paid for the job.

She said, "Keep digging. There's more in there." They went on for about 3 days. Finally, at the end of the 3rd day, the woman looked at the latest pile of trash, toys and miscellaneous objects that they had found their home at the bottom of the well. She said, "You're done." Puzzled, one of the men asked how she knew that that was it, and she replied, "Because when I was a little girl and Papa first dug that well, I took a teapot and threw it in the well. I figured the first thing that went into that well would be the last thing that came out."

The lesson is clear. According to God's principle of "first things," what you put first will order the rest. When we put the things of God first in our lives, rather than the desires of our own flesh, the things of God will always come out first.

Maybe you're not where you used to be with God, where you want to be with God, where you should be with God. The message of Ezra/Nehemiah is, it's never too late to start over.

Endnotes

- 1) "Exploring the Scriptures," John Phillips, pg. 82
- 2) "Adventuring Through the Bible," Ray Stedman, pg. 208
- 3) "What the Bible is All About," Henrietta Mears, pg. 161.