

Rebuilding the Ruins: Ezra & Nehemiah Overview

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Today we're beginning a new series in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah. That's page 362 in the Pew Bible. Go ahead and turn there with me. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are the chapters, the small numbers are the verses. And in our English Bibles, Ezra and Nehemiah are two separate books, but originally they were one single story about how God stayed faithful to His promises and brought His people back from exile and advanced His kingdom. So this spring and through the summer, we're going to be walking through both of these books together in a series that we're calling Rebuilding the Ruins. Now, as you know, as Jeff and Birch mentioned, we're in the middle of a building program and a capital campaign as a church.

And if you've been around churches for a while, you know that oftentimes pastors will gravitate towards these books when their church is doing a building project. I mean, hey, they're building stuff in Ezra and Nehemiah. We're building stuff. It seems like the perfect fit, right?

Well, that is not why we're doing Ezra and Nehemiah in this season as a church. We're looking at Ezra Nehemiah because these books at the end of the day are actually about mission. They're about being the people of God, relying on the greatness of God to fulfill the mission of God.

It's easy as a church to forget that we are a people with a mission. Last Sunday, we celebrated Easter, and the risen Jesus across the Gospels and into Acts has commissioned us to go forth into all the nations, declaring the victory that he has won, declaring that Christ is king, that he's ended our exile from God, and now in the midst of the nations, we're meant to be salt and light in his name, advancing God's kingdom of grace and renewal until Christ returns and makes all things new.

But we forget sometimes that we're meant to be this people with this mission. How does that happen for us? Well, for starters, life gets busy, doesn't it? There's work, there's family, there's school, there's bills, there's Netflix, there's Reddit, there's the incessant flow of notifications on our phones, and with all that going on, it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture that God has a mission for us. But on top of that, it can be easy in a city like ours, where people are so transient to lose sight of the mission. After all, every August and September, there's a whole new crop of people who will arrive for work or for school, and many of them will come already looking for a church. And they'll land here at Trinity, and they'll be a new part of our family, and that's really exciting. It's one of the joys of the work that God has given us.

[3 : 0 3] But with all those new faces, almost every year, it's easy to forget that our mission as a church isn't merely to be a home for Christians who are new to the area. Our mission is also to introduce new people to Christ, people who've never heard of Christ, or people who've never really heard what the gospel is all about. We're meant to be a place where people are coming to know Jesus for the first time. God has a mission for us. Third, it can be especially easy to lose sight of God's mission during a building project, believe it or not. We can get more animated by stone and steel and dollars and cents than about why we're doing any of it in the first place. That is the mission God has given us, to see His grace transform our city. And fourth, it can be easy to lose sight of the mission God has given us when we feel like we've messed it up and fallen short and failed the first time around.

Is there hope for Christians, for churches who've gotten off track, who've gotten distracted by the busyness, by the transients, maybe by the buildings? Can God still use us? Does He still have a plan for us in the advance of His kingdom of grace? And that's where Ezra and Nehemiah come in.

God is a God who rebuilds the ruins and who invites us, even us, to join Him in the work. So today, I want to give an overview as best I can of Ezra and Nehemiah. We're going to walk through the details chapter by chapter in the coming weeks. But before that, I want to hopefully help us see the whole mountain range before we get up close and start the ascent. And that will help us, I hope, not to lose our way along the way in our sermon series. And if we take a step back and take in this book as a whole, I think the mountain range looks something like this. That after all seems lost, God advances His kingdom in sovereign faithfulness and He restores us, His people, to participate in the work. After all seems totally lost, God advances His kingdom in sovereign faithfulness and restores us, His people, to participate in the work. So the sermon this morning is going to have two parts.

First, God, then us. So let's jump into chapter 1, verses 1 through 4, and we'll get started. Ezra chapter 1, verse 1.

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. 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. Whoever is among you of all His people, may His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

[6 : 26] And let each survivor in whatever place he sojourns be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

Now there are two things we see about God, even in these opening verses, that will come up again and again as this book unfolds. First, God's sovereignty, and second, God's faithfulness.

But in order to really get the fullness of that, we have to pick up the threads of this story. The first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, is about 539-538 BC. For 50 years, the people of Israel have been in exile. In other words, they've been a totally conquered people. Their temple, their capital city, all of it has been burnt to the ground. Their families have been displaced. They're living in a foreign land under foreign kings far from home. And the worst part about it is that this exile they were in was ultimately because of their own rebellion against the Lord. Because they had rejected God as their king in the land that God had given them and worshipped other gods that were no gods at all, the Lord, after centuries of warning them and warning them through the prophets, finally gave them what they were asking for. He gave them over to the other gods. And in 587, the Babylonian empire conquered

Jerusalem and burnt it to the ground. And then they could go worship those other gods in exile. And now Israel lived in exile, in shame, their homeland and their lives in ruins.

But was that going to be the end of the story? Would shame and ruin be the last word? You know, throughout those dark years of exile, it must have seemed that way on many days. And worse was the growing realization that this was what we deserved for our sin, for abandoning our allegiance to the Lord.

[8 : 48] But through those dark years of exile, there was a light. There was a light that began to shine. You see, the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, they had all foretold the coming destruction as a result of Israel's sin. But all had foretold something in addition to that.

Isaiah also spoke about a new exodus that would come. And Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant. And Ezekiel even spoke of a new temple. Glimmers of hope that God had not abandoned his mission to fill the earth with his glory and to redeem a people for himself. Adam had been cast from the garden because of his sin. Israel had been cast from the promised land because of their sin.

But neither would be the end of God's story. In 539 BC, Cyrus, the Persian, conquers Babylon. And a new chapter begins in world history.

But God begins a new chapter in redemptive history. The ruins will be rebuilt. The promises will be kept. And the kingdom of God will advance. And all of this is as a result, on the one hand, of God's sovereignty.

Look again at verse 1 where it says, The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom. In and through the human events of history, God's hand is at work bringing his good purposes to pass.

[10 : 31] We're going to find this throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. You know, if you read through this sort of twofold book of Ezra and Nehemiah, you'll notice that there aren't any so-called miracles in this book.

If you're looking for red seas to be parted in two, if you're looking for fire to come down from heaven, you're not going to find it in Ezra and Nehemiah. And yet, God is no less active.

The hand of God is at work stirring the hearts of kings, protecting the journeys of his people, empowering his people in the face of opposition, humbling his people in the face of their sin, bringing about genuine repentance and change.

The events of 539 were no accident. God was not caught off guard when Cyrus, king of Persia, ousted the Babylonians and began to rule.

No, the God, the Lord of heaven and earth, who holds every human heart in his hand, was bringing his plans to pass. But the exercise of God's sovereignty isn't some arbitrary display of force.

[11 : 47] The second thing we see about God in Ezra and Nehemiah is that God is above all faithful to his promises. The whole book begins this way.

Look again at verse 1. That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled. In Jeremiah chapter 29, God promised the Israelite exiles that one day he would end Babylon's tyranny and bring his people home.

And this book starts by saying that God made good on his promise. God's glory is displayed not just in that he is sovereign, but that he is sovereignly faithful, keeping his word forever without fail, even in the face of our faithlessness.

This is the stunning fact of Ezra and Nehemiah. None of God's faithfulness to the people was deserved.

The people hadn't loved God with their whole hearts. The people hadn't loved their neighbors as themselves. In fact, as Ezra and Nehemiah unfolds, we'll find that they still need a rescuer. God was under no obligation to rescue them, to restore them, or to rebuild the ruins they had made.

[13 : 06] But God's faithfulness to the unfaithful, this is the banner that flies over this book and flies over the whole biblical narrative.

God is faithful to the faithless. And friends, that's the message that's being sung in every sunrise, in every cool rain that falls, in every crop that grows.

God is faithful to the unfaithful. Friends, nothing that the Bible says will stir you, or electrify you, or wake you from your sleep, until you get this utterly profound reality that you and I have been completely unfaithful to God, and yet God has remained faithful to us.

So faithful that He was willing to take on flesh, die on a cross, be raised to new life so that He could keep His promise to redeem a people for Himself.

That's how faithful God is to the faithless. And the mission of God will make no sense to us as a church. We will remain distracted by our worldly cares, we'll remain comfortable with the people who are already like us, we'll be more excited about sticks and bricks than hearts and lives, until the Holy Spirit gives us ears to hear that in the face of our unfaithfulness, God's been faithful.

[14 : 44] after all seems lost, praise God in His faithfulness, in His sovereign faithfulness, He advances His kingdom.

That's the first major thread running through this whole book. And the second is this, that God restores us, His people, to participate in the work.

When we take Ezra and Nehemiah as one story, we see that it kind of roughly falls into three parts, and each part involves a sort of major element of the rebuilding that takes place in the return from exile.

First, there's the temple, and second, there's the law of Moses, the Torah, and third, there are the city walls. That's sort of the structure of the book as it sort of plays out. Temple, Torah, walls.

Worship, word, city. In other words, when God advances His kingdom and His sovereign faithfulness, the people make the worship of God central again.

[15 : 51] And they order their lives around the word of God again. And they devote themselves to the rebuilding of the city of God again. So first, worship.

We see this in Ezra chapters one through six. If you want to just sort of glance down, and skim over those six chapters, the events in this part of the book take place over a 20-year time period, roughly from 538 to 516 BC.

And this section of the book tells the story of the first generation, the first remnant to return from exile under the leadership of a man called Zerubbabel and another called Jeshua, who's the priest.

We see a list of that first generation in chapter two. And then in chapter three, they rebuild the altar and lay the foundation of the temple. In chapter four, they face external opposition and the building grinds to a halt.

And then in chapter five, the rebuilding starts up again after a 17-year hiatus. And then in chapter six, at last, the temple's finished. Now, the temple was the center of worship under the old covenant.

[16 : 57] It was the symbol that God dwelled in the midst of his people. And it was a sign, it was a signal, it was a foretaste that one day, God's glory would cover the earth like the waters cover the sea.

It was sort of the beachhead in the midst of fallen creation saying that God was going to reclaim his creation again. And so before anything else, the first thing after returning from exile was the temple.

And we'll see that this work didn't come without a struggle. In chapter five, the people have to be reminded and exhorted by two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to make this work central and to finish it.

But nonetheless, the first thing, the priority, was the temple. Now, as New Testament believers, we don't have a physical temple anymore.

When God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, the true and better temple arrived. Now God really was dwelling in the midst of his people. Now the sacrifice for sin could really happen.

[18 : 02] All of that, all that the temple stood for was fulfilled in Christ. And so we don't need a physical temple anymore. In fact, because Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the church, because we're united to Jesus through the Spirit by faith, Paul can even say that the church is the temple of God now.

But even though we don't have or need a physical temple anymore, the priority of worship remains. Rather than gathering at the temple to praise God and commune with him, we gather in the name of Jesus to praise God and commune with him.

And Jesus says, where you are gathered, there I am in the midst. As we think about our mission then, as we're encouraged by the example of these Old Testament saints in Ezra 1 through 6, we see a critical truth that praising and thanking God for his grace, in other words, the worship of God, is the first part of the church's mission.

Before the doing, there has to be doxology. Before going, there has to be gratitude. After all, when we think about mission in the traditional sense of the term, as in taking the gospel to people who don't know it yet, why does mission exist?

It's been said that missions exist because worship doesn't. Why do we take the gospel to people who don't know it yet? So that they too might know God and praise him and love him and give him thanks and worship as their creator and redeemer.

[19 : 44] In other words, so that they might worship God as their God. That's why missions exists. And so, because God through Christ has forgiven our sin and brought us out of our spiritual exile, our first business must be worship.

Letting God be God and thanking him and praising him and walking with him and trusting him. Of course, worship isn't something we just do on Sundays.

We're meant to worship God Monday through Saturday as well. I wonder, friend, what forms does that take for you? At work, at home, during your commute, with your kids, at bedtime, over breakfast, how are you giving thanks and praise to God in word and in deed?

You know, the beautiful thing about Christianity is that that worship of God will take on as many forms and as many sort of colorful manners as there are believers in the church.

How are you giving thanks and praise to God throughout your life, throughout your week in word and deed? That might be a good question to talk about today over lunch with your family, with your friends. What does that look like for you?

[21 : 05] But if worship is meant to be happening Monday through Saturday, it is the particular business of Sunday. To gather as the church, to join our voices together, to be present physically with one another and give our corporate thanks and praise to God.

I wonder, how do you prepare for this great privilege on Sundays? I mean, you're here. I'm kind of preaching to the choir. I get that. But how are you preparing for this gathering?

Our Sunday gatherings are meant to be a public demonstration of the supreme worth of our triune God. God, why not spend some time on Saturday nights praying and preparing your heart for gathered worship?

Why not pray for the Holy Spirit to move in power? Pray for open ears and soft hearts. Pray that the praise of God in and through the church will draw men and women to Christ who don't know Him yet.

That's what we actually see in Ezra chapter 6. Flip ahead to the end of this section to Ezra chapter 6. After completing the temple and dedicating it, the people celebrate the Passover festival.

[22 : 26] And in verse 21 of chapter 6, we see that it's not just the people of Israel who eat the Passover, but also, as it says there, everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the people of the land to worship the Lord.

the God of Israel. In other words, their neighbors were turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God. They joined the feast.

Pray that it would be so for us as a church as well. So the people make central the worship of God again. And then second, they order their lives around the Word of God again.

We see this in Ezra chapter 7-10. Now, if you glance down at the beginning of chapter 7, the reign of Artaxerxes is mentioned. And that means that the events of chapter 7-10 happen almost 60 years after the first part of the book in chapters 1-6.

This is about the year 458 BC. And it's in these chapters that the man Ezra steps onto the stage. Ezra actually isn't involved in the rebuilding of the temple during that first generation that returns.

[23 : 45] Rather, he comes 60 years later on a mission of the Word. Look at chapter 7-10. It says, Therefore, Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

What a wonderful verse. I am sure we're going to circle back around to that one once we get to those chapters in our series. But you see there that Ezra comes teaching the Word. In chapters 7-8, we read about Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

And then in chapters 9-10, we read about Ezra's ministry once he gets there. And what we find is that it is far from comfortable. The journey is risky and dangerous and the ministry is difficult.

Ezra shows up in Jerusalem and finds that the people have actually broken the law of Moses by marrying people outside the faith. And in so doing, they're opening themselves to the danger of falling into the worship of other gods.

the very thing that put them into exile in the first place. So Ezra has to call them back to faithfulness through confession and repentance, back to a sincere devotion to the Lord alone.

[25 : 10] Friends, reordering our lives around the Word of God is rarely comfortable for long. many parts of God's Word challenge us, humble us, even at times offend us.

But then again, if God's Word is actually God's Word, isn't that what we should expect from time to time?

I take it as a fairly safe working assumption that I am not God and I am not perfect.

I think we can all agree on that. And so when God encounters me in His Word, there are going to be times when I hear things I don't expect to hear because I am not God.

and there are going to be some things that I don't want to hear because I am not perfect. There are going to be things that challenge my cultural assumptions that go against my feelings.

[26 : 17] Sometimes the Word's going to be like a sword that pierces down into soul and marrow, Hebrews says. But here's the good news.

When like Ezra, we let the Word of God take center stage, something amazing happens. God moves.

People change. Communities are transformed. The prophet Ezekiel once had a vision from God of a valley of dry bones.

And the bones were actually symbolic of the people of Israel in exile. Israel. And then God tells Ezekiel to do something very strange. He says, preach to the bones, Ezekiel.

Now, if God ever told me to go down to Grove Street Cemetery, not seminary, that's a different thing, cemetery, and start preaching, I would probably ask the elders for a little counsel.

[27 : 22] And yet, God says to Ezekiel in this vision, preach to the dead bones, Ezekiel. And so Ezekiel, in faith, starts doing just that, preaching to a valley of dead bones.

And as the Word of God goes forth, so does the Spirit of God. And Ezekiel sees the bones resurrected, and standing before him is no longer an open mass grave, but a living and breathing host of men and women exceedingly great.

Sometimes we think that the Word of God needs to be watered down or modified or adjusted in order for the mission of God to go forth, but just the opposite is true. The Word of God brings the Spirit of God, and the people come to life.

After all, people don't need to hear something they already know. People need to hear something that we don't know, that God created us in His image, and that even though we've turned away and sinned against Him and that we deserve His just judgment, God sent His Son, Jesus, as a substitute who was willingly judged in our place so that all who receive Him can be made right and accepted by God and filled with His Spirit and made truly alive forever.

We need to hear something that we don't already know. We need to hear good news. No one listens to a TED Talk because you think you already know that. No one wants to listen to that.

[28 : 52] Listen to a watered-down TED Talk, right? Why would we think anything else in the church? Ezra shows us that the mission of reordering our lives around the Word is the only path to real renewal.

This is when the bones start taking flesh and come alive again. As uncomfortable as sometimes it is, the God who rebuilds ruins is doing it through the instrument of His Word.

And that brings us to the third part. They reorder their lives around the Word of God again and then third, they devote themselves to rebuilding the city of God again. This is the main theme of the 13 chapters that we call the book of Nehemiah.

In 445, a man named Nehemiah, who was a Jew, was a cupbearer to the most powerful man in the world, the Persian king, Artaxerxes.

And this Nehemiah gets word way out in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, that Jerusalem's walls remain broken down and burned. And this breaks Nehemiah's heart so much that in chapter 2, he risks his position with the king and requests to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.

[30 : 16] And just like there was a decree in chapter 1 that sent that first generation of exiles back, and just like there was another decree in chapter 7 that sent Ezra back, again, this next section of the book starts with another decree of Artaxerxes and a miracle of God sending Nehemiah back to rebuild the walls.

And the rest of chapters 2 through 7, in the midst of external threats and internal pressures, Nehemiah, along with the people in Jerusalem, accomplished something almost utterly inconceivable.

In just 52 days, without a crane, without a bulldozer, they rebuild the city walls around Jerusalem.

And the rest of the book tells about the covenant renewal that takes place. Ezra again teaches the word of God to the people and they respond with obedience and faith in chapters 8 through 12.

And then the whole book ends in chapter 13 with Nehemiah recounting more of the reforms he made during his leadership. So what are we to make of this work of rebuilding the city walls?

[31 : 30] Well, from the perspective of the New Testament, I think we can understand it like this. The city of Jerusalem, you see, was always more than just a city. In the Old Testament, it was a city, but it was a very symbolic city.

It was not just the place where the temple was housed, but it was the place where the great King David and all the kings who came after him ruled God's kingdom on earth.

In the book of Psalms, we actually find whole psalms devoted to praising and adoring Zion, which is another name for the city of Jerusalem, the city of the king.

This was the place where the king ruled. This was the place where the kingdom of God touched down to earth and began its spread to the nations. But when Jesus came, fulfilling all the hopes of Israel for their long-awaited Messiah, their long-awaited king, something very surprising happens.

He doesn't take up residence in Jerusalem. After being crucified for our sins and resurrected in indestructible life, just like God had said the Messiah and seed of David would be, Jesus didn't ascend to the throne in Jerusalem.

[32 : 52] He goes one greater and ascends to the very throne of heaven. He burns a hole through the sky and sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

And when Christ ascended and sat on that throne, it meant that his kingdom on earth would no longer be confined to a single city in a single country.

Because Christ sits on the throne of heaven, the whole earth is his rightful dominion now. Do you remember when the disciples asked Jesus after his resurrection if this was the time when he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Do you remember what he said? He said, oh, you don't get it yet. After I ascend to the Father and pour out my spirit on you, you're going to be my witnesses not just in Jerusalem and Judea but to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So now, wherever the church of God gathers in the name of the ascended King Jesus, whether it's in New Haven or whether it's in New Delhi, India or whether it's in New Castle, Australia, there, friends, is an outpost of the kingdom of God.

[34 : 07] There is the presence of the new Jerusalem. There is the city of the king. And like Nehemiah, our hearts should long for the renewal of this great city, the city of God, the church.

We should pray regularly for its revival, for its health, for its growth, for its stability, for its safety. And the beautiful thing about the book of Nehemiah is that as much as it's about a great leader like Nehemiah, it's as much about the people themselves and how everyone has a part to play.

So brother, sister, where is your place on the wall? Where are you building the city? Where are you advancing the kingdom? Yes, there will be opposition.

Ezra and Nehemiah assure us of that. But God is sovereign and God is faithful and the Lord Jesus will be with us always even to the end of the age.

There's a song we sing that goes like this. His kingdom cannot fail. He rules on earth and heaven. The keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given.

[35 : 28] lift up your heart. Lift up your voice. Rejoice. Again, I say rejoice. God is rebuilding the ruins, friends, and he invites you to join him in worship, in the word, and in the building up of this glorious city, the church.

Through your gifts of love and service and ministry and prayer and witness, we've all got a part to play. This is the mission before us. May we follow our risen Lord wherever he leads.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you how you moved so powerfully during this period of history so many years ago.

God, as we look back and as we read these stories, we acknowledge that as many great triumphs and victories that you allowed your people to have during those years, God, there was many ways in which the work was still incomplete.

So, Father, as we think about this mission that you've called us to, we acknowledge that we need you desperately. Father, we need your spirit to be poured out upon us.

[36 : 47] We need the new hearts that only the gospel can bring. We need the energy and strength that only your spirit can give. Oh, God, we need our loves to be realigned, which is something only you can do in your beautiful and glorious grace, God.

Lord, would you rebuild the ruins of our hearts and our families and our churches and our neighborhoods would you bring hope, God, and life and would you use us?

God, we humbly ask that you would use us as a church in this great work. Help us to find our purpose and joy in following you. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our strong Savior and in the power of his Holy Spirit at work within us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.