

The Return From Exile

Bible Overview 18

1. *Ezra: The Story*

Having been exiled to Babylon, the Jews are now under the control of Cyrus and the Persians who took over from the Babylonians as the world power. They remain in exile, just with new masters. We saw in previous weeks great promises of restoration: a new temple, a return to the land, freedom from enemies, a new obedience to God, a new David (King) to name a few!

Ezra and Nehemiah are really one book, telling the story of the return from exile. Ezra focuses on the temple's repair, Nehemiah on the wall of Jerusalem.

A) Stage 1: The Return Home

1:1-3 Cyrus allows the Jews home, to rebuild temple.

1:6-7 The locals offer gold, and the original temple ornaments returned. (cf Exodus)

2 The concern for names: why? It's the same Israel as before the exile.

3:2 Zerubbabel is governor, a son of David. Why important? (Matthew 1:12)

3:3-5 The sacrifices begin again

→ God is being faithful to his covenant and promises. A Davidic ruler, a return to the land, the people preserved, the temple being rebuilt.

Much of the language of Ezra is deliberately 'Exodus' language: there are direct quotes, allusions, and symbolic references. Why do you think this is?

B) Stage 2: The Temple Project

3:6 The temple has not been built, though the sacrifices have started.

3:8-10 The temple foundations laid, to mixed response v12: why?

3:11 The temple worship restarts

4:1-3 An attempt at sabotage! Why does Zerubbabel resist letting the help?

4:11-24 Letters to Prevent temple being built

What is the reason given by the 'enemies'?

What similar situations occur today?

4:24 Work stops!

5:1 Two prophets sent, Haggai and Zechariah. (Only Malachi is later than these two.)

Timeout: Haggai

V1 Who does Haggai minister to?

V2-4 What is God's complaint and message?

V9-11 What is the result?

What do you think of the following (imaginary!) preacher's message? If you like it, think why. If you don't think why not and how you'd change it.

'God is disgusted that the people are building nice houses for themselves whilst his house, the temple, lies half-built and unattended. Likewise think how much you spend on Ikea furniture, carpets, and carpets. Think how much you spent on your last kitchen, and on the new extension. Think how much you spent on your house, the debt you're prepared to enter into. As we try and raise money to repair the church roof and carpet and heat the floor, do you not think God deserves his house to be at least as beautiful as yours? I urge you to repent and give generously.'

Hint: Try looking at John 2:19-22 and 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

C) Stage 3: Start, Stop and Succeed in building temple

5:2 Zerubbabel begins the rebuilding

5:3 Tattenai writes to Darius to prevent re-building

6 Darius writes back and tells Tattenai to get lost (7) and even help finance the project (9-11)!

6:14-15 The temple is rebuilt! A mini 'High point' of Ezra. Perhaps all God's promises of restoration are going to arrive.

What clues are there that something's missing?

D) Stage 4: Ezra's Ministry

The rest of Ezra deals with Ezra's ministry itself. We'll pick a couple of themes.

2. Ezra: The Themes

A) The Word of the Lord

Ezra is introduced in ch7 as a scribe 'skilled in the Law of Moses' (7:6). In 7:10 he sets his heart to serve and teach the Word of the Lord and amazingly King Artaxerxes, the emperor, writes a letter endorsing his teaching (7:25-6)! Ezra's ministry shows two important themes in this regard

- i) The move from oral to written authority
No longer are we reliant on a prophet: instead the scribes, lead by Ezra come to the fore, who's job it is to teach the written word of God.

Often people will doubt that God would speak through a book. But what are some of the advantages of communicating this way?

- ii) The Centrality of the Word: Bringing 'revival'
Nehemiah 8:1-8 It is the teaching of God's word already given, rather than some fresh or new word from God that brings revival and renewal.

What lessons has this to teach us?
How do we get this wrong?

B) Separation (The Spiritual Wall)

Ezra is committed to the holiness and purity of God's people. There are lots of references to 'separating' from the non-believing peoples around: 6:21, 9:1, 10:11.

- i) Marriage of non-Jews
Ezra constantly preaches against Jews marrying unbelievers.

How serious is this problem? (9:1-6)
Why is it a problem? (9:2)

The last prophet picks up this problem: Malachi 2:11-12:

Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. ¹² As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob ^[d] —even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty.

Those guilty are even named and shamed in God's eternal word: Ezra 10:18ff

Is this racist? (6:21) How do we apply this in New Testament times?

3. Nehemiah

A) The Story

1:1-3 Nehemiah is still in exile, and hears that although the temple is rebuilt, Jerusalem's walls remain destroyed.

2 He is released to oversee the repair.

The rest of the book tells the story of Nehemiah's struggle to get this task completed. He faces opposition from foreign enemies like Tobiah and Sanballat (remember those names!). He finally completes the project in ch 6. The second half of the book recounts the 'covenant renewal' ceremony and the people's response. This is the high point of Nehemiah:

9:38 Because of all this?

10:1-28 The covenant signed: 4 big promises:

10:30 No intermarriage

10:31 Sabbath obedience: no trade with foreigners

10:32 Sacrificial giving

10:39 Keep the Temple pure

In chapter 13 Nehemiah is called back to Susa. Eventually he is allowed to return to Jerusalem. What does he find? Why are these things in particular highlighted?

13:4-5

13:10

13:15-16

13:23-25

13:28

13:30-1 ends the story of the Old Testament! How does it leave you feeling?

Have God's promises been fulfilled?

E.g A faithful people in a land, with God dwelling amongst them, blessing the nations. A Davidic king ruling, sin being cleansed and eradicated.

Timeout Malachi

Malachi is the last of the OT prophets. Even from a quick skim of the book it is obvious things aren't going well: religious duty is happening but sloppy 1:6-8, the priests are lazy, there is intermarriage (!), no-one is giving financially sacrificially: all very messy. Is the plan petering out? The OT ends with a bit of a whimper, but...

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. Malachi 3:1-4