Exploring the Old Testament

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Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the student should:

1. Be able to outline the primary themes of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.
2. Recognize the chronological relationship between Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.
3. Know the major events of the Restoration Period.
4. Understand leadership principles from the life of Nehemiah.
6. Relate the message of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther to today’s world.

Lesson

Read Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther
Memorize Nehemiah 2:17 and Esther 4:14

Books of the Restoration

The last three historical books are from the years following Cyrus’ decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They trace the exiles’ return to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and the difficulties returning exiles faced in reestablishing the city. These books are important in covenantal history for two reasons.

- Ezra and Nehemiah show the challenges God’s people face in maintaining their spiritual and national identity. The rebuilding of the temple and the revival in Ezra restore Israel’s spiritual identity. The rebuilding of the walls in Nehemiah is an important step in restoring Israel’s national identity.

- These books show God’s providential care for his people in the years following the exile. Ezra and Nehemiah show God’s care for the returnees; Esther shows God’s care for those who were still in Persia.

538 B.C. First return
– led by Zerubbabel
(Ezra 1-4)

483-473 B.C. God spares the Jews in Persia (Esther)

444 B.C. Nehemiah
rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem

516 B.C. Temple is completed
(Ezra 5-6)

458 B.C. Second return – led by Ezra
(Ezra 7-12)

Unity of Ezra-Nehemiah

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. They were not divided in Christian Bibles until the fourth century. These books share much in common:

- They share the same historical setting.
- Both relate returns to Jerusalem under Artaxerxes I of Persia.
- Both include rosters of the Jewish people.
- Nehemiah 7-12 summarizes the reforms of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

### Persian Rulers in the Restoration Period

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<th>King</th>
<th>Date</th>
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### Ezra

**Theme: Return from Exile**

**Date: 538 – 458 B.C.**

The book of Ezra traces two returns. It shows the rebuilding of the temple as well as the challenges faced by the returnees.

Traditionally, Ezra was recognized as the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, as well as the possible author of 1 & 2 Chronicles. The repetition of Cyrus’ decree at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra shows the unity of these books.

Ezra was a Levite, a descendant of Aaron.\(^{153}\) He ministered to his fellow Jews in captivity and then led a group to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. He was serving as a spiritual leader when Nehemiah returned in 444 B.C. Together, they led a spiritual, ethical, and moral revival. Ezra was particularly important in leading the people back to the Word of God.

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\(^{153}\) Ezra 7:1-5.
Structure of Ezra

» Zerubbabel’s Return (1–6)

فتر The Return (1–2)

After capturing Babylon, Cyrus gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Historically, this fits the policy of Persian rulers. Persian rulers often allowed defeated nations to remain in their homeland. God worked through a pagan ruler to accomplish his sovereign purpose for his people. This same pattern will be seen in the New Testament when God works through Caesar Augustus to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem for the birth of Messiah in the city of David.

<table>
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The book of Ezra begins with the return under Zerubbabel, including a census of the 49,697 returnees. Zerubbabel, a member of the line of David, was placed in a position of leadership by the Persians and was a symbol of hope to the returned exiles.

فتر The Work: Rebuilding the Temple (3–6)

After arriving in Jerusalem the people began work on the temple (536 B.C.; Ezra 3). They reestablished worship and laid the foundation for the temple. However, the Samaritans living near Jerusalem opposed the rebuilding and were able to stop the work (Ezra 4).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Ezra does not trace everything in chronological order. Ezra 4:6-23 shifts from the time of Cyrus to the opposition of the Samaritans fifty years later under Ahasuerus. The entire chapter is unified by the theme of Samaritan opposition to the rebuilding. It shows that this opposition was more than a temporary conflict. The structure of Ezra 4 is:
A. Ezra 4:1-5 – opposition to rebuilding the temple under Cyrus (536 B.C.)
B. Ezra 4:6-23 – opposition to rebuilding the walls at a later time (perhaps after Ezra’s return in 458 B.C.)
A. Ezra 4:24 – opposition to rebuilding the temple under Cyrus (536 B.C.)
There is a gap of about 15 years between Ezra 4 and 5. Ezra 4 ends in about 534 B.C. when the opposition of the Samaritans brought work on the temple to a halt. Ezra 5 begins with resumption of work in 520 B.C. at the encouragement of the “temple prophets,” Haggai and Zechariah. The temple was completed in 516 B.C.; Ezra 6 reports the celebration at the dedication of the temple.

**Ezra’s Return (7-10)**

- **The Return (7-8)**

Eighty years after Zerubbabel’s return, Ezra led 1,758 people back to Jerusalem. “Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” He led a spiritual revival among God’s people.

- **The Work: Social Reforms (9-10)**

The challenge of the first group of returnees was rebuilding the temple. Ezra faced a different challenge: intermarriage between the Jews and neighboring people. This was not an issue of interracial marriage; it was a religious issue. In Judges and in the life of Solomon, we see how marriage with unbelievers quickly led Israel into religious apostasy. For two reasons, this was a particular problem for the restoration community:

- Jerusalem was surrounded by unbelievers. Idolatry was a constant temptation.

- Persia was a syncretistic empire. The philosophy that made it easy for Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their homeland was, at the same time, a philosophy that made it easy to accept multiple religious beliefs. The Persians were not committed to any one religious system. Instead, the Persians blended multiple beliefs. In this environment, the Jews could easily surrender their identity as the people of God.

Because of this, Ezra immediately confronted the issue of mixed marriages. His prayer of confession showed the seriousness of this issue and brought the people to a willingness to confront the problem. Ezra 10 ends the book with Ezra’s plan for dissolving the mixed marriages.

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156 Syncretism is the blending of different religious beliefs into one system.
Nehemiah

Theme: Rebuilding the Walls
Date: 445 – c.432 B.C.

Like Daniel, Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who rose to a high position in the Persian Empire. The cupbearer was a trusted position. Because of threats to the king, the cupbearer was responsible to guard against poison. In addition, because of his constant access to the king, the cupbearer often had great influence on political decisions.

In 445 B.C., Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and spent much of the next twenty years in Jerusalem. Ezra was a Levite who led in spiritual renewal; Nehemiah was a civic leader who led in the rebuilding of the walls of the city. Both were devoted to God’s call and to God’s people. Malachi’s prophetic ministry may have overlapped Nehemiah’s years in Jerusalem; the book of Malachi addresses the same evils addressed in the last part of Nehemiah.

Read Nehemiah’s prayers in 1:4-11; 4:4-5; and 13:29. Discuss the importance of prayer in his ministry and the role of prayer in your ministry. Is prayer important in your ministry as it was in Nehemiah’s ministry?

Structure of Nehemiah

Rebuilding the Walls (1-6)

Ezra records the rebuilding of the temple, a project that was completed in 516 B.C. However, due to the opposition recorded in Ezra 4, the walls were not completed. As a result, the city was under constant threat from enemies.

Nehemiah organized the rebuilding project, inspiring the people to work, confronting opposition, and completing the task in a remarkable fifty-two days. The book of Nehemiah provides a valuable textbook on biblical leadership.

Prayer was an important part of Nehemiah’s ministry. Over and over again, the book of Nehemiah records his prayers in times of crisis. When Nehemiah heard the news of Jerusalem’s condition, he “sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.”157 Before bringing his request to the king, Nehemiah “prayed to the God of heaven.”158 When Sanballat and his associates opposed the rebuilding of the walls, Nehemiah prayed for God’s protection.159 In times of pressure, Nehemiah repeatedly turned to prayer.

157 Neh. 1:4.
158 Neh. 2:4.
159 Neh. 4:4-5,9; 6:9.
Rebuilding the People (7-13)

The second half of Nehemiah focuses on the spiritual reforms led by Ezra and Nehemiah. The list of returned exiles parallels the census in Ezra 2. Like the genealogies in Chronicles, the lists of exiles in Ezra and Nehemiah show God’s protection of his people.

The last section of Nehemiah focuses on spiritual reforms. Nehemiah 1-6 shows the rebuilding of a physical wall around God’s city; Nehemiah 7-13 shows the rebuilding of a spiritual wall around God’s people. The history of Jerusalem demonstrates that a physical wall is no defense if God’s people are unfaithful to God’s law.

Nehemiah 8-10 reviews Ezra’s ministry. As Moses had commanded, the law was read to the people in a covenant renewal ceremony. The people confessed their national guilt and pledged faithfulness to the covenant. Nehemiah 11 and 12 gives another census followed by a report of the dedication of the wall.

At some point, Nehemiah returned to Susa for a time. When he returned to Jerusalem, he found that the people were profaning the Sabbath, an issue addressed by Malachi near the same time. In addition, some of the people had married wives from the surrounding (unbelieving) peoples, the issue addressed by Ezra two decades earlier. Nehemiah 13 reports Nehemiah’s handling of these problems.

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Deut. 31:10-11.
A Closer Look at Spiritual Leadership

Many books on spiritual leadership have been based on the principles taught in Nehemiah. Leadership lessons from Nehemiah include:

- **Spiritual leaders must be people of vision.**

Nehemiah had the ability to see a goal and to see the steps necessary to accomplish the goal. After riding through Jerusalem at night, he said to the leaders, “Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem.” Where others saw only rubble, Nehemiah saw a wall.

A spiritual leader seeks God’s vision. Nehemiah’s emphasis on prayer is important, as it shows that he was finding God’s plan. Without constant reliance on God, Nehemiah might have substituted his own vision. A spiritual leader must find God’s vision for the organization he is called to lead.

Throughout the book, Nehemiah demonstrates his ability to communicate his vision to others. On one of the darkest days of World War II, Winston Churchill walked into the Cabinet Room and said, “Gentlemen, I find this rather inspiring.” Churchill knew how to communicate a vision to his followers and to inspire them to move forward. Great leaders know how to challenge their followers to persevere in difficult times.

- **Spiritual leaders must plan carefully.**

A visionary leader who fails to plan carefully will rarely bring his vision to reality. Nehemiah was a master at planning. When the king asked his request, Nehemiah gave specific requests: time away from his palace duties, materials for the walls, letters of authority for the journey. Nehemiah did not simply say, “This is God’s work, so God will take care of the details.”

Nehemiah carefully planned each step of the project, dividing the work between the people. He appointed workers to areas that were most meaningful to them, an important motivational strategy. Spiritual leaders seek God’s vision, and then they seek God’s guidance in planning the project.

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161 For further study on Nehemiah and leadership, the following books are helpful:
Gene Getz. *Nehemiah: Becoming a Disciplined Leader.*
David McKenna. *Becoming Nehemiah: Leading with Significance.*
J. Oswald Sanders. *Spiritual Leadership.*

162 Neh. 2:17.

163 Neh. 2:4-8.

164 For example, the priests worked at the sheep gate, the gate nearest the temple (3:1). Jedaiah made repairs near his house (3:10). Nehemiah gave assignments that were important to the workers; this gave them ownership of their job.
Spiritual leaders must be people of courage.

As Israel began to build, opposition arose. Sanballat and Tobiah mocked the project; they later made threats against Nehemiah. They plotted to invite Nehemiah to a meeting where they could harm him. Nehemiah’s response is a great example of a leader’s ability to focus on the vision in the face of opposition: “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” Nehemiah refused to be deterred from the work. Even when his life was in danger, he pursued the vision that God had given him. A spiritual leader must be a person of courage.

Spiritual leaders have a spirit of service, not a spirit of entitlement.

In a day when leaders often use their position for self-advancement, the example of Nehemiah is powerful. Some leaders in Jerusalem used their position for personal profit. Nehemiah says, “But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land.” A spiritual leader uses his position for the good of the people he serves, not for his own advancement.

Robert Morrison, the great missionary to China, wrote: “The great fault in our missions is that no one likes to be second.” Spiritual leaders look for opportunities for service, not for self-promotion. They use their position for the good of the people they lead.

Spiritual leaders know the importance of prayer.

Prayer was central to Nehemiah’s leadership. He made no major decisions without prayer. In Joshua, we saw the result when Joshua made a treaty with Gibeon before seeking God’s guidance. Nehemiah avoided this error; every decision was made after prayer.

The Gospel of Luke gives a powerful illustration of the importance of prayer for spiritual leaders. “And it came to pass in those days, that he (Jesus) went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles.” Before choosing the twelve, Jesus spent the night in prayer. If the Son of God saw the importance of prayer before a major decision, how much more should we pray before leadership decisions!

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165 Neh. 6:3, English Standard Version.
166 Neh. 5:15-16.
167 Quoted in J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Leadership, p. 63.
168 Josh. 9.
Spiritual leaders must adapt to the needs of each situation.

A great wartime leader may be a disastrous leader in peace time. The pastor who builds a young church may struggle to lead a more mature church. Organizations require different types of leadership at different stages of their development.

Nehemiah provides a model for leaders facing this challenge. Spiritual leaders must have the discernment to adapt to the needs of each situation. “An effective leader is one who leads according to how the situation dictates. A person who leads one way in one situation would not necessarily lead the same way in the next.”

As cupbearer, Nehemiah was in a place of influence. There, his influence was based on his ability to listen and to advise the king. The king would respect Nehemiah’s suggestions; he would not have accepted Nehemiah’s commands.

When rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah must take a different approach. Here, his leadership is based on his ability to organize and inspire. He cannot make quiet suggestions; he must command and encourage the discouraged people of Jerusalem.

Later, Nehemiah served as governor (Neh. 7-13). The people had broken the covenant and Nehemiah had to lead based on authority and conviction. We see this in Nehemiah 13; “I commanded”; “I contended with the rulers”; I “set them in their place.” This was a different leadership style than that of a cupbearer or a builder. Spiritual leaders must have discernment to know how to lead an organization in each situation.

As a church or ministry leader, you will benefit from a careful study of Nehemiah and his approach to leadership. Nehemiah models true spiritual leadership.

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170 Al Long, Leadership Tripod, p. 33.
Esther

Theme: God is in Control
Likely Date: 483-473 B.C.

The book of Esther shows God’s “providence” protecting his people. Can you point to an example of God’s providence in your life or in the life of your church?

The events of the book of Esther take place between Ezra 6 and 7. While God was protecting his people in Jerusalem, he was also protecting his people who were still in Persia. Whether in Jerusalem or in Persia, God is in control.

The author of Esther is unknown. Some have proposed Mordecai as the author, but the book of Esther itself does not identify an author.

The events of Esther probably took place around 483-473 B.C. during the reign of Ahasuerus. It is set in Susa, the capital of Persia.

Like the book of Ruth, the book of Esther is a short story featuring a young woman who models faithfulness in the face of adversity. Ruth is a Moabitess who is faithful to Jehovah while living in Israel; Esther is a Jewess who is faithful to Jehovah while living in Persia. Ruth’s faithfulness wins her a place in the lineage of the Messiah; Esther’s faithfulness saves God’s people from destruction.

Contents of Esther

Some writers have questioned the value of the book of Esther. They see it as a secular book linked to a secular Jewish holiday, Purim. The book of Esther never mentions God, prayer, or the covenant. It is never quoted in the New Testament, nor has it been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, this is a book of great encouragement to believers. Esther presents a powerful message of hope to the people of God. The book of Esther teaches:

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171 Ahasuerus is usually known by his Greek name, Xerxes I. He ruled Persia from 486-465 B.C.
172 Purim is still celebrated today in the month of March. It comes from the word pur, or “lots.” Haman chose the day for the destruction of the Jews by casting lots. On Purim, Jews are to celebrate their deliverance from their enemies.
The Sovereignty of God

While God’s name is not mentioned, he is the “unnamed central character” of the book of Esther. What some people might call chance or coincidence is actually “providence,” God’s hand at work. Consider some of the “coincidences” in this story:

- Of all the girls in the kingdom, Esther, a Jewess, “happens” to be chosen queen.\(^{173}\)
- Mordecai “happens” to be at the right place at the right time to overhear a plot to kill King Ahasuerus. He reveals the plot to Esther, who tells the king.\(^{174}\)
- Ahasuerus “happens” to suffer from insomnia the night before Esther plans to reveal Haman’s plot to the king.\(^{175}\)
- Of all the records which could have been read to help Ahasuerus fall asleep, the reader “happens” to open to the record of Mordecai’s service to the king.\(^{176}\)
- Haman “happens” to enter the king’s room just as Ahasuerus is considering how he can reward Mordecai.\(^{177}\)

Just as a sovereign God brought Ruth to the field of Boaz, a sovereign God protected his people in Persia. Mordecai saw God’s hand at work: “Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”\(^{178}\)

The Importance of Faithfulness

Throughout the book of Esther, the faithfulness of God’s servants is highlighted. The story of Esther contains many parallels to the story of Joseph. Both feature a young person who is faithful in a foreign land. Both characters are raised to positions of influence in the government. Both characters are used by God to preserve his people in a time of danger.

Esther’s faithfulness to God is seen throughout the story. Her statement, “If I perish, I perish,” is a commitment to faithfully pursue her responsibility regardless of the outcome.

The book of Esther shows the faithfulness of Mordecai. Like Joseph and Daniel, Mordecai is raised to a position of influence, a position which allows him to achieve God’s purposes.\(^{179}\)

\(^{174}\) Esther 2:19-23.
\(^{175}\) Esther 6:1.
\(^{176}\) Esther 6:1-3.
\(^{177}\) Esther 6:6.
\(^{178}\) Esther 4:14, English Standard Version.
\(^{179}\) Esther 10:3.
The Folly of Wickedness

During modern observances of Purim, plays reenact the story of Esther. Each time the name Haman is heard, the audience jeers and mocks this enemy of God’s people. While the festival is secular in nature, and while many who celebrate Purim may have forgotten God’s sovereignty in the story, even the manner of celebration reflects part of the message of Esther – the folly or absurdity of wickedness.

Both Ahasuerus and Haman become figures of mockery in the story. Ahasuerus is a powerful ruler over 127 provinces. He holds a festival for 180 days to celebrate his wealth and power, but he cannot control his wife.

Haman finds his wicked plots turned against himself. Haman tries to honor himself, but is appointed to honor Mordecai, his enemy. Haman tries to destroy the Jews, but destroys himself and his family. As Proverbs teaches, God “scorneth the scorners.”

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther in the New Testament

2 Kings ended with the Jews in exile, the temple destroyed, no king on the throne, and no sign of a Messiah. The promise to Abraham seemed empty. Ezra and Nehemiah show the rebirth of that promise. Although there is no king, Israel is back in her homeland and the stage is set for the coming of Messiah. Esther is important because, like Joseph at the end of Genesis, her story shows how God preserved the messianic line. While these books have no prominence in the New Testament, they are essential to the birth of Messiah. Through Ezra (a priest), Nehemiah (a cupbearer), and Esther (a queen in a pagan land), God prepared the way for the birth of his Son.

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181 Esther 7:7-10; 9:10.
182 Prov. 3:34.
In chapter 4, we saw that the Hebrew Bible uses the title “Former Prophets” for the historical books. This shows their purpose: bringing God’s message to God’s people. Each of the historical books has a message for us today.

Judges, Samuel, and Kings demonstrate the principle of sowing and reaping. As God’s people were faithful to covenant, they experienced God’s blessing; when they broke covenant, they experienced God’s judgment. This principle has sometimes been misapplied in the church. We must be careful when applying the history of the nation of Israel to another situation. Some interpreters have used these books to teach that a Christian who obeys God faithfully is guaranteed financial prosperity and physical health. The book of Job and the psalms of lament demonstrate that godly men may suffer. However, the basic principle remains true; God’s approval and blessing rests on those who are faithful to him.

Joshua, Ruth, Nehemiah, and Esther show the importance of faithfulness to God. God is sovereign, but God works through human instruments. Both truths must be acknowledged if we are to remain true to the teaching of God’s Word. Mordecai expressed this truth when he said to Esther, “For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Mordecai recognized God’s sovereignty; God would rescue his people in some way. However, Mordecai also recognized Esther’s responsibility to faithfulness. A quote attributed to Ignatius says that you should “pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you.”

What does this say to us today? Like Joshua, Ruth, Nehemiah, and Esther we should be wholeheartedly committed to God’s service, holding nothing in reserve. Then, like those same saints, we should be resigned to his will. Like Esther, we maintain a spirit of surrender to God’s purposes: “If I perish, I perish.”

Finally, the historical books bring a message of hope. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles show that even in the exile God was not finished with his people. Today, we can be encouraged to know that God is still accomplishing his purposes. The historical books remind us of God’s sovereignty in accomplishing his divine will. We can face the future with confidence; God is in control.

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183 Esther 4:14.
Lesson Assignments

1) Choose one of the following assignments:

   Option 1: Group Assignment
   Read the book of Nehemiah and make a list of leadership principles. You can begin with the principles shared in this chapter, but there are many more in Nehemiah. As a group, discuss the principles you find. Show how you will apply these principles in your ministry.

   Option 2: Individual Assignment. Choose one.
   A. Write a 1-2 page essay on “Revival” based on Ezra and his revival in Jerusalem.
   B. Write a 1-2 page essay on “Spiritual Leadership” based on Nehemiah. Find at least 2-3 leadership principles beyond the ones listed in this chapter. Show how you will apply these principles in your ministry.
   C. Write a 1-2 page essay on “God’s Providence” based on Esther.

2) Take a test on this lesson. The test will include the Scriptures assigned for memory.

Digging Deeper

To learn more about the return from exile, please see the following resources.

Printed Sources


Online Sources