



Ezra-Nehemiah

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:18

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In most modern Bibles, these books are separate, but that division happened long after it was written. It was originally a unified work written by a single author. The story is set after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and took many of the people into exile. And this book picks up about 50 years later and tells the return of some Israelites to Jerusalem, and then what happened when they rebuilt the city and their lives there.

Specifically, the book focuses on three key leaders who led the rebuilding efforts; you have Zerubbabel, then Ezra, and then Nehemiah. And the book's design focuses on the efforts of each leader. Zerubbabel leads a large group of people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Then, about 60 years later, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem to teach the Torah and rebuild the community. And then he's followed by Nehemiah, who leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

And these three stories are designed to be parallel. Each begins with the king of Persia prompted by God to send the leader to Jerusalem, and he offers resources and support. And then each leader encounters opposition in their efforts, which they then overcome, but in a way that leads to a strange anticlimax in each of the three parts. Let's back up and see how it fits together.

Ezra 1-6

01:18-03:22

So the story begins with a decree from Cyrus, the king of Persia, and he's moved by God to allow the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. And the author says this fulfills a promise made by the prophet Jeremiah, that the exiles would one day return to Jerusalem. Now, this fulfillment should trigger our hopes in the many other prophetic promises that exile was not the end of the story. We have

hope for a future messianic king from the line of David. We have hope for a rebuilt temple, where God's presence will dwell with his people. Hope for God's Kingdom to come over all the nations and bring his blessing, just like he promised Abraham.

And so it's with all these hopes in mind that we read on into the story of Zerubbabel. His name means "planted in Babylon." He represents the generation born in Babylonian captivity, and he leads a wave of Israelites returning to Jerusalem. After they settle there, they rebuild the altar for offering sacrifices and later the temple itself. The foundation-laying ceremony and then the temple's final dedication, these are key moments. The past stories of the tabernacle and temple's dedication should be in our minds. This is when the fiery cloud of God's presence is supposed to descend, he's dwelling with his people—and it doesn't happen.

And so while some people are happy about this new temple, the elders who had seen the previous temple of Solomon, they cry out in grief. It is nothing like their glorious past or their hopes for the future. And it's right here that we get the first story of opposition, and it's very odd.

So the grandchildren of the Israelites, who were not taken into exile, they had been living in Jerusalem all along. They come to offer help with the temple rebuilding, and Zerubbabel refuses. He says, "You have no part in our temple." And this, of course, generates a conflict, which Zerubbabel overcomes. But it's very strange because the prophets had envisioned that the tribes of Israel would all come together, along with all of the nations, to participate in the worship of the God of Israel when the Kingdom finally comes. So this is an anticlimactic moment to say the least.

Ezra 7-10

03:23-04:59

In the next section, we zoom forward about 60 years, and we're introduced to Ezra. He's a leader among the exiled Israelites in Babylon, and he's a Torah scholar and a teacher. And so he gets appointed by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to lead another wave of people back to Jerusalem. And Ezra wants to bring about spiritual and social renewal among the people. Our hopes are high. And again, we come to another anticlimactic moment in the story.

Ezra learns that many of the exiled Israelites that had come back, they had married non-exiles who had been living around Jerusalem. Some of them were non-Israelites, and almost certainly some of them were. Ezra then appeals to the commands of the Torah that Israel was supposed to be holy and separate from the ancient Canaanites. And he then says that the people living around Jerusalem are like the Canaanites; they're going to corrupt the exiles.

So Ezra offers a prayer of repentance, and it's very heartfelt. But then he rallies all the leaders and enacts this divorce decree that says all these marriages should be annulled, the women and children sent away. And then the decree is only partially carried out. We're given a list of some of the men who divorce their wives. The story is very strange for a number of reasons.

First of all, God never commanded Ezra to do any of this. It was the leaders of Jerusalem who led Ezra to make the decree. Second, the contemporary prophet Malachi, he did say that the exiles should care about purity, but he also said that God was opposed to divorce. And so the mixed results of the decree, this all fits into this pattern of a strange concluding anticlimax. Which leads us to the next section about Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 1-7

05:00-06:01

He's an Israelite official serving in the Persian government, and when he hears about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls, he prays and then gets permission from the Persian king Artaxerxes to go and rebuild the walls. The king even gives him an armed escort and all these resources. So after arriving in Jerusalem, he begins the building project, and he too faces opposition from the people who had already been living around Jerusalem. Once again, we face a tension in the story.

The contemporary prophet Zechariah said that the new Jerusalem of God's Kingdom would be a city without walls, that God's presence would surround it, that people from all nations would come and join the covenant people. But Nehemiah seems to operate with the opposite vision. He informs the people surrounding Jerusalem that they have no part in Jerusalem, and this, of course, provokes them to hostility. And so while Nehemiah carries out his vision for the city with integrity and courage (they have to build the city with armed guards to protect them), we keep wondering—Could this whole conflict have been handled differently?

Nehemiah 8-12

06:02-06:42

And this all leads to the conclusion of the book in two movements, first positive and then negative. Ezra and Nehemiah combine forces to bring about a spiritual renewal among the people. They gather all the exiles together for a festival. They read and teach the Torah to all the people for seven days, and then they celebrate the ancient Feast of Tabernacles to remember God's faithfulness from the exodus and the wilderness journeys. Then they offer a confession of their sins. They vow themselves to renew the covenant, follow all the commands of the Torah, and they finish with the great celebration over the temple, the walls of Jerusalem. And we're thinking this could be the turning point. But it's not. The book ends on a huge downer.

Nehemiah 13

06:43-07:30

Nehemiah tours around the city, and he finds that the people have not been fulfilling their covenant vows. So Zerubbabel's work is undone as he finds the temple being neglected and staffed by all these unqualified people. He then discovers that Ezra's work is being compromised. He finds everyone violating the Torah. People are working on the Sabbath, and even his own work on the walls is involved because people are setting up markets around the walls of Jerusalem and working on the Sabbath.

So Nehemiah, he goes on a rampage. He's beating people up, he's pulling out their hair, and he's yelling, "Obey the commands of the Torah!" In his final words are a prayer that God would remember him, that at least he tried. And the book ends. I mean, it's very strange, but we've been prepared for it, right?

Conclusion

07:30-08:35

These anticlimactic moments have been woven into the book's design intentionally. And so it raises the question, What on earth does this book contribute to the storyline of the Bible? Well remember, the book started by raising our hopes in the prophetic promises about the messiah, the temple, the Kingdom of God, and then none of it happens!

So even though Israel is now back in the land, their spiritual state seems unchanged from before the exile. And while Ezra and Nehemiah, they do their best, but their political and social reforms among the people don't address the core issues of their heart. So what the book is pointing out is the same need highlighted by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. What God's people need is a holistic transformation of their hearts if they're ever going to love and obey their God.

And so the book ends on a downer, yes, but it forces you to keep reading on into the wisdom and prophetic books to find out what is God going to do to fulfill his great covenant promises. But for now, that's the book of Ezra-Nehemiah.