

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 21: Ezra & Nehemiah *Returning and Rebuilding*

Welcome to Week 21 of the Bible reading coach podcast. My name is Karl Vaters, and I'm here to help you read through the entire Bible in 52 weeks.

This week, we're going to be getting into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. And by the time we're done with this week's readings, we will be at the end of the Old Testament timeline. There's one more history book to go in Esther. But Esther actually takes place between Second Chronicles and Ezra. So the timeline itself ends at the end of Nehemiah. After that, we'll be heading into the poetry books and then the prophets. But the Old Testament narrative, as we'll see this week ends on a very hopeful note. Also, almost everyone agrees that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, our Jewish friends still see them as a single book. We don't know why they were split into two books, but they're a single story.

So I want you to note one really interesting thing about this before we get into it. When they left 70 years ago, when they were taken into captivity, 70 years before Ezra and Nehemiah, they had been called Israelites for most of their history. When they come back for the first time ever, you're going to see a new word, they're going to be called the Jews. Ezra for 23 is the first time that the word Jew is used in the entire Bible. So the words Jew, Jews and Jewish appear about 300 times in Scripture, but not one time before Ezra, which is the end of the Old Testament narrative.

So why is that? Why are they now called Jews? Well, it goes back to Judea. If you'll remember, at the end of the time before the the last several several centuries actually, before the exile, the nation had been split into two kingdoms called Israel to the north and Judea to the south, and Judea was the last of the two to be exiled to fall when Jerusalem fell. At that point on, we don't exactly know why. But from that point on, it became fairly common to call them not Israelites, but Jews. And so for the rest of the Bible, both those terms will be used. But Jews will be the most common term used for God's people from this point on.

But this week's reading and Ezra chapter four will be the first time we will read that. So let's get into it. First of all, it has read chapters one and two, we know when these events took place, like exactly and here's why Ezra one one says, in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, we know from historical records that this was 538 BC. Now when you read chapters, chapter one, verses one and two, it's going to be a bit of a *deja vu* and here's why. If you flipped one page back in your Bible, you're gonna see that the last two verses of Second Chronicles, are virtually identical to the first two verses of Ezra, they take place 70 years apart. But this parallel of verses tells us that it's a continuation of that story.

So what you have is they've been in exile for 70 years, and then the king allows them to start going home if they want to go home, why would the King who exiled them allowed them to go home? Well, because seventy years later, it's not the same king who exiled them. In fact, it's not even the same kingdom. Since they were taken into captivity by Babylon, and actually Assyria before that, they now have been conquered by Persia and Cyrus is the king. And basically, Cyrus looks around and goes, I don't care if these people were slaves or not, they've basically been integrated into our culture. If they want to go home, they can go home. After all, I rule over Israel as well. So who cares?

So he lets them go home, and they slowly start to go back home again, in history, chapter three, some of them get home with the first wave. And they get started with priority number one, which is to honor God by rebuilding the altar, and by rebuilding the temple. Now, we need to be really careful in drawing parallels here. You'll see they get back, they want to honor God, they rebuild the physical temple, they rebuild the physical altar. It's really easy for us as Christians to take that parallel and go Well, that means that we should respect the church building. Now, yes, we should respect the church building.

But here's the deal. The New Testament parallel, today's parallel to the Old Testament Temple is not our church buildings. Don't look at the Old Testament temple and go however, however they treated the temple we should treat our church building. That's not the parallel. The parallel to the Old Testament Temple is our New Testament bodies, our physical bodies, individually and when we gather, the New Testament is really clear about that. And we'll get to that when we start reading the New Testament. The Bible tells us that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, that we are to honor God in our bodies, that God no longer dwells in a physical place built of brick and stone and wood, but he dwells within the hearts, our fleshly hearts within our actual body. So when we see them treating the Old Testament temple, well, that tells us how we are to treat ourselves as God's people, both individual and gathered, how do I behave in my body?

How do I honor God and honor others in my body that is honoring God's temple? How do I treat the assembly of God's people, when we meet together, whether it's in a church building, or a coffee shop, or in a house, it doesn't matter where the building isn't the point, the point is the people, the people are the temple today, back then it was a physical place. So back then, first thing they wanted to do was to invite God back into the presence again, back then the way they had to do it was to build a temple on the altar, because God was present when they offered sacrifices on the altar at the temple. But as your foreign five tells us, that no work of God happens without opposition. We'll see more opposition in Nehemiah when they start building the wall.

But immediately, there is opposition to the people building the wall. In chapter five, we're going to see two prophets step up, mainly Haggai and Zechariah. Yes, the same Haggai and Zechariah of the books that we will be reading in chapter 40. At the end of the Old Testament, this is when they lived. Then in chapter six, the temple is built and they celebrate the Passover. This is for the first time in a long, long time, Darius of Persia, comes along and he actually has to tell people, yes, they're allowed to do this. And that kind of silence is the opposition for a while. And who's Darius of Persia, wasn't it Cyrus of Persia that we had? Yes. This is how much time has passed that kings have changed. Later, we're going to see Nebuchadnezzar, we're going to see Xerxes, by the time this is done, we're going to see Artaxerxes as well, why? Because a lot of time passes. And we'll go over some of that. But the Kings constantly change, because the time is a long period of time.

Well, they finished the temple, they celebrate Passover for the first time in at least 70 years. And I say at least 70 years because, well, they have been in exile for 70 years, the temple has been destroyed for 70 years. But the reason the temple was destroyed, the reason they were sent into exile is because they had been obeying God for a long period of time. It may have been decades before that, that they hadn't been doing Passover as well. We don't know for sure. But in chapter six, we see Passover the first time in at least 70 years.

Then finally in chapter seven, verse one, we meet someone for the first time, Ezra. That's right. We go through six chapters of the book of Ezra before meeting the man, Ezra, he finally shows up and he shows up in 458 BC, again, you'll read in there, it does not just the year but the month and the day that he shows up. And it's 80 years after Ezra one when the first group started to go in. That's how much time has passed.

Okay. It's been several kings later. It's been 57 years since they completed building the temple. So people started showing up 80 years ago, they finished the temple 57 years ago, and Ezra shows up. Then in chapter seven, verse one, it's a long, long time, he shows up with a letter from the king. He shows up with money from the King. This time, it's the King Artaxerxes. And he's shown he's given permission to tax the people around him to do further building of Jerusalem. Again, this is 80 years after the original exile started to come back or 150 years after the exile first happened. It's a long period of time, he gets back and nine through 10. And when he looks around, he discovers that the people have been intermarry with pagans and worshipping idols in the 57 years since they finished the building of the temple. He caused them to repent, and thankfully, they do.

Now the wall is still down. It's been down now for 150 years since it fell originally. And the temple is now in disrepair. It's been 57 years since it was built. And in the intervening decades, they've been worshipping as pagans, and they've been worshipping idols and ignoring the temple so that there are weeds growing up through the cracks. And so he calls them to repentance. They do repent and they say we're going to do better from now on. That's where Ezra ends.

And then Nehemiah picks up with Nehemiah one and two, the men the men named me, Nehemiah. Now we first meet Nehemiah, not in Israel. He's not there yet. But we meet him because he's the cup bearer of Artaxerxes, the king of Babylon. And he looks sad one day and the king asks him, "Why are you sad? You're usually so happy". And he says, "I've just heard report back that Jerusalem is in ruins. It's my hometown from generations ago", like it's a long way back, right? But he says, "I'm really feeling sad that it is in such bad shape." And the king gives him permission to go back to assist in the rebuilding of it. He sends money with them, and he sends him permission to rebuild and to tax the people in order to get it done.

So he shows up in chapter three, and in chapter three, verse seven, you've got the great story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall. I want you to note a couple of things through this because there are a couple chapters in three through seven where it's this person built this person, this one, and this person built that and it can feel a little boring and slow. So let me give you a couple of things to look for that will really bring it to life for you. Notice how everyone was involved in the building of the Wall. You've got builders, but you've also got Goldsmith's, and perfumers and women and children and people who don't even live there. Take a look at the variety of people who simply stepped up and said, The job's got to be done. It is actually one of the great collaborative moments of the entire Old Testament. It's the reason why pastors often use Ezra and Nehemiah, especially in Nehemiah and the segment in sermons about how to work as a team in the church. Everybody steps up, and everybody contributes.

But there is opposition as there always is when we're following God. And the opposition to this season gets so bad that the Bible tells us they had to finish the job with a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other. It is finished, however, and by Nehemiah 8 through 10, Ezra calls the people to repentance, he reads the law, they recognize their sin, they repent, and they pledged

to be better. And from this point on idolatry, and paganism really never becomes an issue for the Jews again, by the time of Jesus, they've actually swung the pendulum so far to the other side, that instead of paganism and idolatry, they swung it all the way over to legalism. And that's the argument that Jesus has with them. Both legalism on one hand, and paganism is paganism, on the other hand, are extremes that we should never fall into. But idolatry is really never an issue for the Jews again, after this point.

And then we conclude, Nehemiah with chapters 11 through 13, where after some counting of the temple workers and some of the families, the Old Testament narrative ends with these beautiful words, "Remember me with favor, oh my God" in Nehemiah 313, verse 31.

If the Old Testament was purely chronological, this would be the second to last book was only Malikai after it. So Malikai is chronologically placed as the last book of the Bible. But this is right before Malikai chronologically, now remember that as we continue, because after this from Esther and the Psalms, and the books of wisdom, and the prophets. Everything after this point takes place before this point. And as we go through we'll point that out to you, we'll remind you of it so you're aware of what we're dipping back into the chronology.

But as we finish up, here are a couple things to keep in mind. First of all, remember that this all happens after the 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Some of that will also see later on the captivity in Babylon itself and the book of Daniel, you will notice that this is the end story of the Old Testament. This is where this Old Testament narrative ends. You'll notice that they will learn their anti idolatry lesson and they'll never fall back into that again, but they will have problems with legalism later on. But mostly as you're reading this week, take a look at what happens when God's people cooperate under a God given plan. When we hear from God, when we obey God, and when we all pitch in together to follow what God has called us to do. Amazing things happen. All right, enjoy the reading this week. There's great stuff. We'll see you next week.

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