

Conversation between Tim Escott and Bec Lee introducing Ezra Nehemiah

Note: AI used to transcribe audio recording – may not be 100% accurate

Bec Lee: Hello, everyone. I'm here with Tim Escort. I'm really excited to be able to open up Ezra and Nehemiah with him. We actually go way back. I've just realized that I think the first time we met was probably around January 2000.

Tim Escott: Yeah, right.

Bec Lee: Which is crazy. And can you tell everyone, you know, what's your link with Janelli?

Tim Escott: Yeah, yeah. Well, I became a Christian at Janali. Where should I be looking? Wherever you want. Okay, well, don't worry about the cameras. Yeah. I became a Christian at Janali. And pause for five seconds. Start a sentence again. Because of this interaction. Yeah. Yes. But seriously, what should. Where should I. It doesn't matter. I don't think you can just. You've got an open stance. You're talking to each other. Just forget that they're here. Oh, okay. Just talk to each other.

Bec Lee: Yeah.

Tim Escott: Yeah. Okay. All right.

Bec Lee: You're telling them.

Tim Escott: You're having a conversation. I don't expect you to speak to the camera. Okay, all right, all right. So I. I became a Christian at Janali. I started going along as a teenager. I went to Janali High. I heard the gospel through the ministry, the youth ministry with Cameron there, became a Christian there, grew up as a Christian, and then I did MTs the year that Neil arrived. So he asked me to do MTs with him in 2007, and then I was there for a couple more years and then left at the end of 2009.

Bec Lee: Fantastic.

Tim Escott: Yep.

Bec Lee: So Ezra and Nehemiah, what kind of relationship have you had with this particular part of Bible?

Tim Escott: Yeah, so, well, I went on. I went and studied at Bible college. I worked in ministry for. In a church for a while, and then I went and did a PhD in Old Testament, looking especially at Ezra, Nehemiah and thinking about how to read them as Christian scripture. So I did that and then I wrote a commentary on Ezra Niehmeyer that's coming out at the end of this year. So I've done a bit of thinking about the books.

Bec Lee: Yeah, so if anyone wanted to purchase it and get used to sign it, you'd be happy with that?

Tim Escott: Yes, absolutely.

Bec Lee: Fantastic. I can imagine there might be some people on staff that might want to do that. Maybe some people at church, who knows? So, okay, Ezra and Nehemiah. For some of us that will be like, yes, I love this part of the Bible. I know it really well. And for others it'll be like, what? So for those who have like zero understanding or perhaps, you know, concept of Ezra Nehemiah, what would you say to help orient them about the whole kind of biblical story or even just the patch of history that all happens?

Tim Escott: Yep. Well, the main thing about them is that it's all about the return from exile. So the exile, I guess, is near the end of the Old Testament part of the Bible. You see, at the beginning of the Bible, God created his people, Israel promises to Abraham. You see Israel properly established at the time of Moses. And then they're establishing the land under David and Solomon, after which time they fall into idolatry in wickedness, and they rebel against God, break his holy laws, violent and unjust to one another, and in constant rebellion, refusing to repent, even though God keeps sending the prophets to call them to repent. But in the end, God judges them by sending them into exile, so sends them off into Babylon. And then Ezra Nehemiah is a story about God being true to his promises to restore them from exile. And so it's set over about 100 years of different waves of exiles returning back to the land, back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, re establish their community, revolution, rebuild Jerusalem and. And be. Re established as God's people.

Bec Lee: Okay, so if. If we. We're thinking, okay, they've been in exile for, you know, a lot of people for. For a chunk of time. What. What was the period of time approximately that, you know, exile was?

Tim Escott: Yeah, so 587 to 3. Sorry, 587 to 538.

Bec Lee: Yeah.

Tim Escott: And 538 was when the Persian Empire was. 539. Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire, and it was the changing of. That's right.

Bec Lee: The God changing of the kings.

Tim Escott: Yeah, that's right. So I guess the Persian Empire had a sort of a different policy when it came to foreign people among them. And so they would send them back to their homelands to, I guess, to kind of win, politically speaking, to win their trust and especially for Israel. They were. They kind of lived in a. The Israelites, the Judeans lived in a strategic part of the empire. And so they wanted, politically speaking, to have some loyal subjects there. So they kind of give them permission to go back to their land and rebuild. Yeah, that was under King Cyrus. But they didn't actually. They returned again. It wasn't just an immediate return from. In 538. It was over a longer period of time. Yeah.

Bec Lee: So if we were to think about the parts of the Bible that other parts of the Bible that may kind of have, you know, kings that we've heard of, maybe, you know, Darius comes up and, you know, we've heard of Cyrus. And then there's other things that are happening. Are there other, like, people could. Characters, you know, historic figures that we know from other parts of the Bible that are living at a similar period of time or are probably doing their part of the history that we have in the Bible at a similar period of time or, you know, maybe.

Tim Escott: Yeah. So you can think of Daniel. So Daniel goes off into exile, near the beginning of the exile, then as an old man, he sees the end of the Babylonians and the beginning of the Persians. And so that's really the. He overlaps with the beginning of Ezra. You also have Esther. And so she's connected with Artaxerxes. Xerxes.

Bec Lee: Xerxes, yes.

Tim Escott: Xerxes, who later. Yes. Yeah. So Xerxes. The early four hundreds. Yeah, yeah.

Bec Lee: Okay. So they stayed on.

Tim Escott: And so that kind of in the middle, it sort of overlaps with the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Bec Lee: It's really fascinating, isn't it, to think of these two stories happening or these several stories.

Tim Escott: Yeah. Oh, and also there's Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. So they are prophets who are actually named in Ezra. Nehemiah talks about how Zechariah and Haggai encouraged them to build, rebuild the temple. And you go, oh, that's interesting. It doesn't really tell you what they said, but then you can go and you can read Zechariah and Haggai and hear about the kinds of things that they're saying. That's kind of early in Ezra, Malachi was operating a little bit later.

Bec Lee: Okay. So if we're. We've got like a historic framework, a little bit of a sense of, you know, where things fit with other parts of the Bible. There big themes that come through these two books. They're big things to look out for or lessons to look out for or a shape to the books that we should hone in on.

Tim Escott: Yeah, Well, I kind of don't know where to start. One place to start is just the idea of restoration. So, as I said, there are three. Well, the structure of the books. You've got three returns from exile and three restorations across the two books. Yeah. So Ezra 1 to 6 is a return to rebuild the temple. Ezra 7 to 10 is kind of a restoration of the people around the law of God. And then Nehemiah 1 to 6, 1 to 7 is about rebuilding Jerusalem. And then the end of Nehemiah is sort of a conclusion that draws them all together. And so just the big picture of restoration from exile, I think, is the first really important one. And because in it, that's where we see God's gracious hand at work. You know, that repeated pattern throughout the Bible of God's salvation of his people in this story of redemption. So that's probably the biggest one. And I think there's something. There's something powerful about that because one of the features of the exile is that the Israelites had so turned from God that they had effectively broken the covenant and they had no claim at all on God's mercy. But just out of his generous mercy, God promised and to restore them and did so. And that's what we see in Ezra Nehemiah.

Bec Lee: It is an incredible thing to consider that they actually get loaded up with treasure and sent back home with the treasure.

Tim Escott: Yeah.

Bec Lee: That was looted from the temple. And you think, oh, God is doing this. This is not a normal thing to happen.

Tim Escott: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

Bec Lee: Kind of reminds you as well of something that happened way earlier with that Exodus where actually they get led out with Moses, but they're loaded up with treasure as they head out as well.

Tim Escott: Yeah, yeah.

Bec Lee: There's some beautiful parallels throughout.

Tim Escott: Yeah, well, that's one of the other interesting things, too. I mentioned before that it's in fulfillment of God's promises. You also see in Ezra Nehemiah the fulfillment of lots of patterns of salvation that we've seen previously in the Old Testament. So, like the Exodus, just the shape of each of the sections where you've got this kind of ruling king who then lets the people go free in order to worship. Just that broad pattern is repeated throughout. That kind of is reminiscent of the exile. There are a number of just small recollections of Isaiah and particularly Isaiah's promise of a second exodus, some of the language of gathering and returning, especially in Ezra 7 and 8. You see some echoes of the wilderness. I'm just trying to think of some off the top of my head. I mean, even just Ezra's journey in chapters seven and eight, where it's, you know, this journey with priests and Levites through the land to this new to the land is reminiscent of the wilderness period.

Bec Lee: But God protects them along the way,

Tim Escott: even if they're scared.

Bec Lee: They're scared that there are going to be people that attack them, but they don't.

Tim Escott: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So you see the patterns of God's restoration throughout the. Another interesting one is just the way God works in a sovereign way. So. And this is a bit of a contrast to previous parts of the Bible. So when you read about the Exodus or the wilderness, for example, or the conquest of the land in Joshua, there's a lot of miraculous activity by God, either to save or to judge or provide for his people. But in Ezra, Nehemiah on a much. It's on a. It's a more providential level in the sense that it's God working through human means.

Bec Lee: Letters that are written and messengers that are sent.

Tim Escott: That's right, yeah. Kind of. Much more mundane kind of political processes. I spoke before about the. Politically, from a political point of view, that the Persians had good reason for returning people like the Judeans back to Jerusalem. But Ezra 1 says that that's. That wasn't just off the top of Cyrus's head, but it was in order to fulfill the word that the Lord had spoken and that the. That it was the Lord who moved the heart of Cyrus. And I think that captures where you've

Bec Lee: got Nehemiah who's, you know, his heart's heavy, but because of what he's heard about what's happening far away. And then he's praying and he's praying, and then the king asks him the question and he prays again, and then he says, you know, I'm grieving for my. For my people in my city. And the king basically says, what do I need to do to help out here? Which is amazing when you're like, yeah, such an answer to Nehemiah's prayers.

Tim Escott: Absolutely. And, you know, the Persian. Yeah, we kind of think of people in power and we kind of think they're worthy of just poking and prodding and, you know, the prime minister over the back fence or whatever. But we don't realize actually how much power and how terrifying these monarchs were. And for Nehemiah, how terrifying an experience that would have been to broach These kinds of things, even in his privileged position, but he sees that it's God at work in Artaxerxes to allow him to return and then supply him with everything that he needs.

Bec Lee: Yeah, absolutely. Pretty lavish. I feel like we should just cover who is Ezra and who is Nehemiah? Like, who are these characters that have their name stamped on these books? So maybe start with Ezra. What do we find with him?

Tim Escott: Well, Ezra's a priest, and he's in the line of high priests, though he's not called a high priest. And. Yeah, so he's sent back by Artaxerxes with provision to rebuild the temple. Sorry, not to rebuild the temple. The temple's already rebuilt. He's going to supply the temple and make sure that temple worship is right. And also just more generally to ensure that the law of the Lord is being enacted in Israel. And again, humanly speaking, the. The Persians were interested in people living by their own laws. It kind of helped them actually have an ordered society as long as they were also under the Persian reign. Yeah, that's right. But we also know that that's God at work to allow his people to be living by their law. So that's. That's Ezra's job. And so that's what he does. He goes back and he leads priests and Levites to supply the temple worship. He also, when he gets there, he finds that people have been intermarrying with foreign, idolatrous women. And he's kind of at the center of working out what. In confessing their sin and working out what they're going to do and ultimately decide to send the women and children away.

Bec Lee: Yeah. So how do we square? What do we do with that? It's a pretty confronting patch of Ezra.

Tim Escott: Yes, it is. And I think there are. Yeah, it's a bit difficult, I think, to do it full justice in just a few minutes, but I think one thing to remember. Well, first of all, I think you need to read it, and I think see it as a real difficulty and a tragedy even. And yes, the women and the children were sent away and you don't hear about what happens to

them. And I think there's something that's just very brief about the account that kind of makes you ask what happened to them. And as readers, I think it's important for us to recognize

the difficulty of that and pastorally as well. If we're teachers and leaders are helping people to read this part of the Bible, not just to be jumping, oh, well, you know, they're just obeying God's law. But to. To recognize the difficulty of that. But of course, then the other side of the tragedy is that just recognizing the gravity of what they're doing by intermarrying with these foreign women. And it's not just their foreignness, it's their idolatrousness. And it speaks about them being like the Canaanites and their abominations, things like idolatry and child sacrifice. And it doesn't say exactly what they're doing here in Ezra and serious sexual immorality. But we need to recognise that actually by intermarrying with these women that they would have been bringing them into their community, bringing in their. Those practices which are both a negative influence on the people, risking drawing them away, but also just having that idolatrous and immoral practice in their community was a threat. Remember that these are the very reasons they went into exile. And so they're risking breaking the covenant again soon after. So soon God's mercy and bringing it back. That's right. And so when we need to then read Ezra's confession of sin as kind of. With all its weight and gravity, as a confession of this sin that they've been a part of. But then there's this terrible pathos throughout where I think the grief is, yes, about the breaking of the law, but also what an awful situation to be. And you have to work out, well, what do we do next?

Bec Lee: It's pretty heartbreaking. And you get the sense from even just the people themselves that they recognize the complexity of their issue and.

Tim Escott: That's right.

Bec Lee: Yeah, they've broken something big.

Tim Escott: That's right. And so I don't think it's. It's then, oh, well, they've done something terrible. So it's an easy fix. I think this is actually, if anyone's been a Christian for a long time, or especially for people, say, who have become a Christian later in life and it has very serious and difficult demands. Discipleship can be. Even though there might be an easy answer, it can actually be very difficult pastorally and personally. And so I think that's a powerful way that Ezra, Nehemiah or Ezra in particular, can help us to think about those things.

Bec Lee: I sometimes think about sometimes other parts of the Bible where, you know, women and children are sent away. And I was thinking about Abraham's situation with Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and thinking about the way that, yeah, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away from this particular line of God's people. And. And we may not hear about

the story of what happens with these women and children in Ezra. But we do get a glimpse of just how kind and thoughtful and present God is in the Hagar and Ishmael situation, where he is the one that actually provides for them. He is the one who sees Hagar. He is the one who protects them and creates a few. And so while we may not know what happens to these women and these children in the Ezra situation, God is the God of all and sees all. And we can trust his character because we've seen his character in other parts of the Bible. We can almost sit back and go, we know what he's like. So we can sit back in that space of trust.

Tim Escott: I've never thought about that before. That's a really. I think that's a really perceptive comment. Yeah.

Bec Lee: Anyway, I think about these things all the time. I think God's character. Where can I see what God's character is like?

Tim Escott: Well, that's right. And we don't. And again, we don't know what happened to these women and children. And we can only imagine it would have been quite difficult to go back because they would have gone back. The way the society structures worked were patriarchal, patrilineal, which meant that kind of everything happened in the realm of the father or the patriarch of a family. And so a woman and children would have moved away from that family that they were within in Judah to then go back maybe to their fathers where they were. But. But who knows what that was like? So we just don't know. Yeah, but as you say, to remember God's goodness and provision, not necessarily having

Bec Lee: it all written down. So that's Ezra. Tell us a bit more about Nehemiah. Who's Nehemiah?

Tim Escott: Yeah. So Nehemiah is a cupbearer to the king. And I think we need to think of a cupbearer as not just a lowly servant who just carries a cup. But remember, a cupbearer is somebody who would have been entrusted, who's entrusted to come close to the king and provide him with his drink. Kings were always at risk of being poisoned. So your cup bearer was someone who would have been trusted and probably would have had some responsibility as well for providing, ordering drinks and whatever that looked like at that time and making sure

Bec Lee: that the best of the best.

Tim Escott: Yeah yeah, yeah. So that was Nehemiah, and he is in Susa, in. In Persia when he hears the report of what things are like back in Judah. Obviously something has happened that we don't hear about. Something has happened to the. To the walls and

the gates. It seems like some kind of fresh difficulty or destruction. I don't think it's talking about just what happened at Exile. I think there's something fresh going on. And he's despairing and wants to go back. And as we talked about before, he ends up getting sent back and he kind of leads the group of people, the Judeans in Jerusalem, to rebuild the walls. And then in the end of Nehemiah, we see both Emperor Ezra and Nehemiah kind of reappear. Ezra reads. Is responsible for having the law read. He reads the law and leads the nation in repentance. And Nehemiah and Ezra are there then in this final dedication of the temple and the city to the Lord. Yeah. And then we hear again about Nehemiah. Right at the very end, he kind of goes away and comes back and finds that the very things that the people had committed to obeying, they had disobeyed again. And so Nehemiah. The book kind of ends in a bit of Nehemiah's despair, kind of trying to whip him into shape, kind of calling out to God for deliverance and his remembrance of his promises. So Nehemiah is an interesting character. I think Ezra is maybe a little more. Well, we don't see a lot of depth in either of them. Ezra, I think, is a little. Is a little. We see less depth in him, but Nehemiah, we see a little bit more because there's so much of his first person account. Yeah. And he's talking about how he's dealing with the enemies Sanballat and Tobiah. Yeah, that's right. And his prayers and his concern about how he's going to come before the king. And so he's an interesting guy to look into as well. But. Yeah, one interesting thing about Nehemiah is that he's often kind of held up as a model of leadership. I don't know if you've kind of. Have you seen this?

Bec Lee: Or maybe I'll look out for it.

Tim Escott: So, yeah, I mean, there's a lot of kind of popular interpretation, maybe less popular now.

Bec Lee: It seems like someone with a bit of an organized head.

Tim Escott: Yes.

Bec Lee: I kind of look at it and go, oh, yeah, he really. He sorted everyone out and he said, okay, there's your patch of wall. Yeah, build.

Tim Escott: Yep.

Bec Lee: And then your next door neighbor to this guy, and that's his patch of wall to rebuild. And then there's this guy, and he's only got daughters, so him and his daughters have to patch this Bit of wall back up and kind of go. He's. He's obviously got organizational.

Tim Escott: Yes, yeah, yeah. Actually, I just remember there's a book by Andy Stanley called Visioneering, and it's about vision and leadership and Nehemiah's his go to guy. And it's funny because I think. I think in one respect it's easy to go, ah, that's kind of a bit superficial. But as you say, there is something about Nehemiah, I think. I think that he actually. He displays a lot of what he does. You can actually go back to Proverbs and see him kind of putting that stuff into practice, that practical wisdom that's grounded in the law of the Lord. And so I don't think it's completely off base. But on the other hand, the important thing, the most important thing is that we don't lose sight of that salvation, historical context and concern of what's going on here. That Nehemiah is so much more than just a model for our building projects because he's about rebuilding Jerusalem in fulfillment of God's promises for the establishment of his people.

Bec Lee: So, okay, so that's back then.

Tim Escott: Yeah.

Bec Lee: These guys, God obviously knew what he was, always knows what he's doing. Picked these two men and they were obedient to him in, you know, leading his people in correct worship Ezra in the temple context, and leading them in terms of, you know, regaining their moral and spiritual heart.

Tim Escott: Yes.

Bec Lee: Towards God. And then you've got Nehemiah, who is. He's a real doer, like, you know, he gets in there, it's just rubble everywhere. And he. He starts a rebuilding process and he's got real people with, you know, real desire to stop that project and to really make everything dangerous for everybody that he's governing. And they have to, you know, strap their swords to their side and build while they're, you know, they've still got their sword. Okay, here I am. I'm in, you know, sunny Caringbah and, you know, dinner to cook and, you know, kids and it's school holidays or it's, you know, school terms starting back up. And so how do I take, you know, what I read in Ezra and Nehemiah and then recognize that that would have been, you know, powerful within the, you know, the biblical history and very significant movement that in a way gets us ready for hearing about Jesus? How do I take this and actually then move it into, you know, the space that I'm in right now? What things should I be looking out for as I, you know, dig deep into this part of God's history.

Tim Escott: Well, the first thing is that I would say kind of something we've already talked about before, just the witnesses. This is to God's grace and mercy and the way that then it foreshadows what he's done for us in Jesus. And I think so much of the Christian. Everything about the Christian life has to have that foundation. And so I think

that's the first thing we need to do. Another is. I mean, one thing that strikes me about Ezra Nehemiah is the. The communal nature of their community. The way that they are saved together, they worship together, they repent together. And one of the features, they work together. Exactly. And one of the features of our culture is that we're pretty individualistic. And I think that seeing how God's people, God draws them together, like this is a reminder for us. And just on that, I think one of the things, when a book seems distant and we seem busy with other things here and now, there are two things I want to do. One is to say, okay, well, let's talk about how it affects here and now. But the other is to say, well, I think sometimes we actually just need to have our vision reshaped. And that when we read about what God has done and what he can do in his people and the importance of worship and the Word, if those things don't excite us on their own, then they should. Our vision needs to be reshaped, our glasses need to be cleaned or something. But then on the other hand, there is still the work of saying, okay, but what about kind of day to day? What does this look like? And so another thing, apart from the communal aspect would be just one of the things about Ezra Nehemiah is them facing up to the difficulty of dealing with conflict, dealing with opposition. Because the reality is that when we are, when we seek to live God's way, when we want to work for his kingdom, we will experience persecution and opposition. And, you know, when we think about how the New Testament calls us to a life of worship, which means giving our lives entirely to him in all our. In the way that we work and the way that we parent and the way we relate with our neighbours, there'll be things that people will look at and go, huh, that's kind of cool. But there will be other things that people say, no, that's. That's not right, or, that's not cool. And so I think one of the things about Ezra Nehemiah is their. Well, it's not just their courage because they're afraid. And, you know, the temple gets. Stops being built for about 10 years because they're afraid. And yet they hear again the encouragement of the prophets and they're able to keep going.

Bec Lee: Which is encouraging, isn't it? When you think about how historically, prior to the exile, God kept on sending his prophets to the people and so few listened. But you do get a sense of, as root, Nehemiah, that even though they make so many mistakes and they do so many things wrong, they seem at least to listen and be willing to go, oh, wow, we did that wrong. A little bit more than, say, prior, I wonder. I don't know.

Tim Escott: Yeah, yeah, that's a good point. And I think that's one of the things. Maybe that's kind of one of the things that's attractive to me about it because it's both. You see there.

Bec Lee: Yeah.

Tim Escott: Their difficulty and their mess. But you also hear. See them as listening. They're hearers and then doers. At least they. They try to do, but they might not. They mess up, they mess up and

Bec Lee: then they're like, ah, sorry, yeah, maybe, yeah, I don't know, maybe there's a little bit more positive there. But yeah, I definitely though, yeah, I mess up, they mess up. God is so patient.

Tim Escott: Yeah.

Bec Lee: Any. Any other thing that, you know, you got to study this for how many years?

Tim Escott: Oh, well, three. Three years. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Bec Lee: Solid years with thousands of words were coming out of your one thing that you took away personally that you're like, oh, no, yeah, that's. That's profound. Like, I need to think more deeply.

Tim Escott: Well, I think, I think from. For me, just that centerpiece of the book in Nehemiah 8, 9, and 10, because.

Bec Lee: Can you tell us about that?

Tim Escott: So Nehemiah 8, they read the law and they both. They weep because they feel like they realize they've fallen so far short. And yet Ezra and the Levites say, no, no, this isn't a day for weeping. This is a day for celebration. Because they're hearing the word of the Lord, and so they hear the word in chapter eight and they just love it. Like, they spend all day listening, and then straight away they go and they celebrate the feast of tabernacles because they realize that's what they need to do. Then in chapter nine, there's this long prayer where they recount their history of their failings, and they recognize now that they are still in their failings and under oppression, and they need God. And fundamentally that prayer. Some people talk about prayer as faith spoken. And that prayer is just is the life of captures the life of faith. It's hearing the word of God, being convicted of our sin, confessing our need, and calling on God for help. Then chapter 10 is when they then seek to renew the covenant, commit themselves to a life of obedience, and then, yes, they fail at it. But that commitment to obey in light of God's graciousness and goodness to them is obviously, you know, that's the center of the Christian life. And you know, I'm just always so struck by these images in the Bible of God's graciousness to us and then our utter dependence on him being like Mary, sitting at Jesus feet before needing to go off and kind of do our thing. There's this receptive dependence on God and then desire just to serve him with all that we have. Yeah.

Bec Lee: Tim, this is lovely. I could chat with you all day. I think I might wrap it up there. But thank you so much for opening up these two amazing books and fiber Pleasure.

Tim Escott: Thanks for having me.

Bec Lee: The pleasure is all ours. Thank you.