



Growth Groups Material
(9 studies on Ezra-Nehemiah)
Apr-Jun 2026
LEADERS GUIDE
Version 1 (20260426): 4 of 9 studies



Teaching Schedule

In our gatherings we will work through a 9-part series

<i>30 Apr - 3 May</i>	Ezra 1
<i>7-10 May</i>	Ezra 3-4
<i>14-17 May</i>	Ezra 7
<i>21-24 May</i>	Ezra 9-10
<i>28-31 May</i>	Nehemiah 1-2
<i>4-7 June</i>	Nehemiah 4
<i>11-14 June</i>	Nehemiah 7
<i>18-21 June</i>	Nehemiah 9-10
<i>25-28 June</i>	Nehemiah 10-13

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Additional Resources

We've put together some additional resources that might help you as you make your way through this series:

<https://www.jannalianglican.org.au/ezra-nehemiah>



Introduction

As we begin this series, *Building What Matters*, we step into the story of Ezra and Nehemiah—two books that tell of God’s people returning home after many years in exile. Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple ruined, and the people scattered. But by God’s grace, a new chapter begins. Under Persian rule, groups of Israelites are allowed to return and rebuild—not just their city, but their life together as God’s people.

Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the temple and the renewal of worship. Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and restoring the community. Together, they show us that God is not finished with his people, even after failure and judgement. He keeps his promises and works through ordinary people to bring about his purposes.

As you read, look out for a few key themes. Notice God’s faithfulness—how he keeps his word and provides what his people need. Watch for the importance of God’s word, as it shapes and reforms the community. Pay attention to prayer, repentance, and perseverance in the face of opposition. And see how leadership matters, as Ezra and Nehemiah guide God’s people with courage and humility.

These books are about building—but not just buildings. They are about building lives centred on God, building communities shaped by his word, and building faith that endures.

Our prayer is that, as we walk through this series together, God would be at work in us—helping us to build what truly matters for his glory.

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Note for leaders:

- Leaders' notes look like this (dot point, grey shading)
- Please refer group members to the QR code on page 2, if they would like to explore further resources.
- As usual, please don't feel compelled to do every question. I encourage you to tailor the study to suit your group.

Study 1 | Ezra 1:1-11 (members booklet page 4)

Introduction

1. Discuss what you know, or have heard about the books of Ezra and Nehemiah

- It's good to begin by acknowledging that most of us are not very familiar with these books. They don't typically feature in sermons (except of course for us this term), or Bible studies, nor are they commonly references in the New Testament.
- Some basic features which people may refer to include: they are history books (e.g. recording events, rather than prophecy); Ezra is about rebuilding the temple; Nehemiah is about building the walls of Jerusalem; and they take place in the post-exilic period when the Jews returned from Babylon to Jerusalem.

2. Work as a group to come up with a timeline of the key Old Testament events. Have a go at placing Ezra and Nehemiah on this timeline.

- This is an important exercise so that we can situate the events of Ezra and Nehemiah in the big storyline of the Bible. You are free to do this exercise however you want (e.g. write key events on cards and cut them up and put into a timeline together, each person come up with their own timeline etc.). The most important events to include to rightly understand where Ezra-Nehemiah fits in would be the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. Ezra and Nehemiah take place at the end of the period of exile.
- Note: When we talk about the exile, we are referring to Judah – the southern Kingdom, centered in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom has previously been destroyed by the Assyrians.

Read and Discuss

3. Read Deuteronomy 28:15,36-37 and 2 Chronicles 36:15-21. Why were the Jews sent into exile in Babylon?

- These verses show us that the Jews were sent into exile, by God, as punishment for their persistent rebellion against him. The books of 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles traces this decline in the spiritual health of the people and conclude with the exile.
- The Deuteronomy passage comes from the blessing and curses God declared to his people through Moses, at Mt Sinai, after the Exodus, prior to entering the promised land.

4. Read Isaiah 44:24-28 and Jeremiah 29:10-14. What hopes found in the prophets could the Jews look to, during their exile?

- The second half of Isaiah is full of promises of God’s gracious redemption to the people in exile (although it was written well before exile). In Isaiah 44, God identifies by name, the Persian ruler Cyrus, as his chosen instrument for conquering Babylon and liberating the Jews from captivity. God promises that one of Cyrus’ agenda items would be to permit the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple.
- Jeremiah was written around, and in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem. Chapter 26 contains a letter which God instructed Jeremiah to write, to the exiles. Verses 10-14 contain a clear promise that after 70 years the exile would end, and God would bless and restore his people to Jerusalem.

5. Read Ezra 1:1-11. What is the key phrase/idea, repeated twice, which makes it clear that God is behind the events of Ezra 1?

- The repeated phrase is that the ‘Lord roused the spirit’. See verse 1, as it relates to King Cyrus, and verse 5, as it relates to the Jews who returned to Jerusalem (“everyone whose spirit God has roused”).
- God’s sovereign control of the events, in order to bring about his promised plans is a big theme of this chapter, and the book at large.
- If we reflect, it’s quite astonishing that the heart and mind of someone as powerful as King Cyrus would be turned towards implementing God’s own plans. This shouldn’t’ surprises us (see Prov 21:1). But it is still incredible!

6. What evidence do we see that God’s judgment against his people was being lifted, and he was intent on blessing them?

- God fulfilling his prior prophetic word in Isaiah and Jeremiah
- The substantial material donations made to the Jews by their neighbours.
- The temple treasury items being returned to the Jews after having been stolen by Nebuchadnezzar. Recall the taking of these by Nebuchadnezzar was a sign of judgment. Now it is being reversed.

Reflect and Apply

7. What do we learn about the power of God in this passage? In relation to world affairs? In relation to powerful people? In relation to his own promises?

- In relation to world affairs – we see God at work ordering the political affairs of the Persian kingdom.
- Similarly, in relation to King Cyrus – a very powerful person at the time, God is working out his plans through Cyrus.
- Ezra's comment in verse 1 (re word of Jeremiah) indicates God is powerful to fulfill his promise.
- These specific instances of God's power in Ezra 1 all have abiding significance for us. We learn that God is supremely in charge of this world and the movement of history. Whilst it is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, we can infer that God remains in charge and the powerful kingdoms of today, along with their rules are in the palm of his hand. This is immensely comforting when world affairs feel out of control (especially the case during war).

8. God keeps his word. Ezra places this theme at the forefront (Ezra 1:1). What promises has God made to us that we can rest in, knowing that he will keep them? What promises from God do you find most difficult to trust?

- Where do you begin? God makes us lots of promises. God promises that he will save, forgive and resurrect those who trust in Christ.
- God promises to do away with all evil and make a perfect new world
- God also promises that he is working through all human affairs for our good (Romans 8:28). Perhaps it's our trust in promises like this one, that speak to the ups and downs of everyday circumstances, that are tested more often.

9. The Jews that returned to Jerusalem left their homes and prioritised the building of God's temple. In what sense do they function as a positive example for Christians today?

- The temple in Jerusalem was understood by the Jews to be God's dwelling place on earth and essential for the Jews, and the whole world, to access and know God. It would have been a costly and significant investment for the returning exiles to leave their settled existence in Babylon to return to Jerusalem.

- For Christians, we've been called to involve ourselves in the work of making God known and taking 'access to God' to the end of the earth. This happens as we share Jesus and the gospel and build up the church (God's new temple).
- We can learn from the returned exiles, as they ordered their lives around the priority of building God's temple.

- **Further Comments:**

- We recommend you conclude all studies by praying in light of what you have discussed/learnt, before moving onto other prayer (if praying at the end of your session)
- Encourage your group to read **Ezra 2** in their own time and ponder why a list like this has been included

Study 2 | Ezra 3-4 (members booklet page 7)

Introduction

1. In our day and age, Christians are often considered out of touch, and perhaps even dangerous in some of their views. How does this make you feel? How should we think about any pressure or persecution we face?

- Ezra 4-6 recounts opposition that the returned exiled faced when building the temple. Seeing the reality of their opposition, and how they responded sheds light in how we ought (or ought not) respond to similar hostility. Hence, it's worth beginning by acknowledging this reality and discussing our experience of opposition.
- In reality, the persecution we face in Australia is minor compared to brothers and sisters around the world (in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East). However, encourage the group to share real moments of pressure they have experienced.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Ezra 3:1-12.** How would you describe the attitude of the returned people towards God? What does the author emphasize to make this point? What is the response of the people to the foundations of the temple being completed?

- The people are very diligent in rebuilding the altar (the centrepiece of the temple where sacrifices were made) and in reinstating the temple practices that had existed prior to the exile)
- The author emphasizes that the practices the people restored were according to what God had previously commanded. E.g:
 - 'in the law of Moses' (v2)
 - 'as prescribed', 'by ordinance' (v4)
 - 'Lord's appointed holy occasions' (v5)
- When the temple foundations are laid there are mixed responses
 - Many people, including the priests celebrated the occasion and praised God for his faithful love (in restoring them post-exile). There are strong echoes of here of the temple dedication of the first temple described in 2 Chronicles 5. See esp. 2 Chron 5:13.
 - Other, older Israelites who had seen the first temple are sad. The reasons for this sadness are not explained, and could be a number of things: a comparison in size and splendour between this temple and the first one; remorse over the sin and judgment that led to the first temple being

destroyed; the absence of the ark of the covenant the cloud like presence of the Lord. In short, we don't know exactly, but the author saw fit to include this observation.

3. Chapters 4-6 describe assorted opposition that the Jews encountered during their temple rebuilding. The events are presented through the inclusion of a series of official letters. List and summarise the letters below:

- You might like to distribute the longer letters to different group members to investigate and then report back to the group.
- Take note that one thing that makes this tricky is the chronology. These instances of opposition do not all take place at this time – there are flashes forward to other instances in later periods. The author has chosen to group these instances of opposition together, thematically to make their point. The reason the work stops in verse 24 is due to the opposition – but not as a result of Artaxerxes letter in verses 17-23 (that letter came many years later).
- Ezra 4:1–5 describes opposition to the first group of returned exiles under Zerubbabel (beginning 538 BC, during the reign of Cyrus).
- Ezra 4:6 jumps forward to oppression during the reign of Ahasuerus (aka Xerxes 485–465BC—when Esther lived).
- Ezra 4:7–23 jumps forward again to oppression during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC—which was during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah).
- Ezra 4:24 picks up the story again from 4:5, moving back to the time of Zerubbabel but also moving forward from the reign of Cyrus to a later king, Darius (whose second year would have been 520 BC, making the period of inactivity under Zerubbabel about 10 years).

Verses	From	To	Summary
4:6	The people of the land	(not told) Presumably King Ahasuerus	An accusation
4:7	Bishlam and co	King Artaxerxes	(not told)

4:8-16	Rehum & Shimshai	King Artaxerxes	The Jews are rebuilding Jerusalem and its walls and are preparing for rebellion.
4:17-23	King Artaxerxes	Rehum & Shimshai	Order to stop the rebuilding
5:6-17	Tattenai the governor, and co	King Darius	The Jewish house of God is being rebuilt. Was a decree by King Cyrus really given as they say?
6:6-12	King Darius	Tattenai the governor, and co	Yes, King Cyrus did decree this work. Let them build the temple and supply them with whatever they need to do it.

4. What was the outcome of the assorted disputes? How did the Jews celebrate the completion of the temple?

- Despite all the attempts to disrupt the work, God’s sovereign power continued to rule through the various earthly powers, and the work continued to be provided for (see especially the positive support of Darius in chapter 6).
- When the temple was completed, the people were joyful (6:16) and made many animal sacrifices. The people continues to recognize their need for God’s mercy and salvation by making a sin offering for each tribe (v17), and by celebrating the Passover (which remembers their rescue from Egypt)
- Note the feast of unleavened bread was the week-long festival that commenced with the Passover meal.
- The author especially points out why the Jews were celebrating in verse 22. Their joy comes from the Lord because he moved the Assyrian King (to support them). It’s unusual and unclear why the Persian Kings (e.g. Darius) is referred to as an Assyrian King. It may be because Darius would have ruled over Assyria (as well as Persia). It may be because Assyria (along with all the neighbouring empires) had been the traditional enemies of Israel for so long – and the author is making a theological point that God had caused a great reversal – Israel’s traditional enemies now supported them.

Reflect and Apply

5. At the heart of relating to God, back then, as it is now, is sacrifice for sin and meeting God in his temple. **Read Hebrews 9:1-15.** How has Jesus perfected the functions originally represented by the temple and sacrificial system?

- It's important for us to see that the temple structures and sacrificial system at the heart of these chapters have been superseded by the ministry of Jesus.
- Jesus entered not an earthly temple, but the heavenly holy place, where he has made a perfect sacrifice for sin. There is no longer a need for ongoing sacrifices for sin.

6. God's people now are also called to work towards the building of God's "new temple", the church, in response to the grace God has shown in saving us. What can we be doing to be building up the new temple?

- The new temple is the church built on the foundation of Jesus and the apostles (Eph 2:20, 1 Peter 2). The way we work to build the temple is through using our gifts to evangelize and see people won for Christ, and to encourage fellow believers towards Christian maturity. What kinds of activities further those aims directly? What activities support this work

7. How might pursuing worship today endanger us like it did the Jews in Ezra's time? What comfort can be found in the knowledge that God's people have always experienced opposition?

- This question returns to the theme from the introductory question. We can imagine a number of ways we might draw unwanted attention: calling people to repent and trust Jesus (when they don't want to), standing firm on moral or ethical issues where the culture has departed from God's word. (c.f. 2 Tim 3:12 which says, "all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.")
- The examples of opposition in Ezra remind us that opposition is to be expected. It is not a sign of failure, but more likely a sign of faithfulness. See Jesus comments to the 12 disciples in John 15:18-21.

8. The theme of God’s sovereign care of his people (first seen in chapter 1) has continued amidst the opposition we’ve read about. How does this help us when we encounter difficult circumstances?

- God’s sovereign control is good to remember at all times, but especially amidst suffering or opposition. These things tend to undermine our faith, and Satan uses such circumstances to prompt us to doubt God’s goodness.
- Remembering that God is in control and is always at work caring for his people brings comfort in times of uncertainty.
- If we put ourselves in the shoes of the Jews we’ve read about, it would be easy to imagine the fear and uncertainty surrounding their temple building work, particular as the political power of their opponents was significant.

Study 3 | Ezra 7 (members booklet page 11)

Introduction

1. What attributes make a leader worthy of following?

- This study will particularly consider the character of Ezra – hence this introductory question.
- Note, history has progressed approximately 58 years since the end of chapter 6. The temple was completed in the 6th year of King Darius (515BC), but Ezra's return described in 7:7 is the 7th year of King Artaxerxes (458BC)

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Ezra 7:1-10.** Even though the book is named after him, we're only meeting Ezra now. What do we learn about Ezra and his character from these verses.

- This is an observation question, prompting you to read verses 1-10 closely. You may notice and comment on other details.
- As for Ezra, we learn
 - that he is a scribe (their role was to copy and teach the Mosaic law)
 - Ezra is also descended from very first high priest Aaron (Moses' brother)
 - Note: verse 11 describes Ezra as a priest AND scribe
 - Ezra had received favour from Artaxerxes the King of Persia because 'the hand of the Lord his God was on him' (1:6) and 'the gracious hand of his God was on him' (1:9)
 - He journeyed with others from Babylon to Jerusalem.
 - Verse 10 – is key – Ezra had determined in his heart to study, obey and teach the Law.
- Ezra is clearly being held up a positive example and key leader for the people of God.

3. **Read Ezra 7:11-26.** What was Ezra appointed to do by King Artaxerxes? How is this different to what we've read about in chapters 1-6? What does this new task signify?

- Ezra's task is not about building the temple, as had been the case in chapters 1-6, but ensuring that the people were learning and living according to God's laws.

- The involved, at a minimum: appropriate sacrifices and offerings (v17) and judging the people according to the Mosaic law (v25-26)
- This new task signifies that the way God’s people were living, and the extent of their obedience to the law was really important to God, beyond the mere building of the temple.

4. What features of Artaxerxes’ decree remind us of chapter 1? What is this repeated pattern teaching us?

- The repeated pattern included a powerful ruler, choosing to send a Jewish captive, back to Jerusalem with their full blessing to serve their God.
- In both cases
 - the King acknowledges God as the God of heaven (the sincerity of this confession is in question – there were undoubtedly political motives at play. The Persian were known for the foreign policy of keeping local ethnicities happy and allowing them to live according to their own customs and even to pray to their own God for the King. It was a ‘hedging their bets’ type policy. If the Persian rulers kept all the ‘so-called’ God’s happy, they thought they would be better off)
 - there is significant donation of resources to the cause
 - There is the order given to other regional authorities (under the Persian King) to support the work of the Jews
- This is teaching us, unambiguously, that God has the most powerful rulers in his hands and can move them to support his plans and purposes as he pleases. It’s also a clear sign that the time of judgment is over – being blessed by the neighbouring peoples (as opposed to be subjected or looted) is a clear reversal of what happened at the beginning of the exile.

Reflect and Apply

5. For those in positions of Christian leadership (or for the rest of us, as we evaluate leaders), what about Ezra’s character ought to be emulated?

- Ezra’s determination to study, obey and teach God’s word is commendable. The saying goes “shepherds of God’s people, must be sheep first”. That is, leaders must attend to their own relationship with God if they are to model and teach others.
- Paul says something similar to Timothy – see 1 Tim 4:16, 2 Tim 2:15

6. In what ways does Ezra point to Jesus? In what ways is the ministry and leadership of Jesus superior to Ezra?

- Ezra foreshadows the work of Christ in a number of ways. Just like Ezra:
 - Jesus was committed to knowing and obeying God’s word. In Luke 2:41-50, the young Jesus is found in the temple wanting to learn. In his temptation scenes in the wilderness Jesus quotes God’s word as he resisted temptation and obeyed God fully (e.g. Luke 4:1-13).
 - Jesus is committed to doing God’s will, not his own (John 4:34, John 6:38, Mark 14:36)
 - Jesus taught with authority (not like the scribes (Matt 7:29).
 - Clearly God’s gracious hand was upon Jesus, as he blessed all that Jesus did and ultimately raised him from the dead.
- Jesus was superior to Ezra in that he never sinned (we rightfully assume Ezra did) although it’s not a theme of the book). Moreover, God’s gracious hand on Jesus led to the ultimate, permanent return from exile. Not from Babylon to Jerusalem, but out from under the power of sin and death and into peace with God and eternal salvation.

7. In chapter 1-6 the temple rebuilding work was complete? And yet the mission of Ezra indicates that the work of restoring God’s people was not complete. The community needed to bring their lives into line with God’s law. Have you ever found yourself content with the formalities and structures of worship, without turning your attention to personal godliness? What has this development in the story of Ezra taught us about that attitude?

- This question is asking us to reflect on the bigger progression we’ve seen in Ezra from rebuilding the temple and restoring temple practices to a concern for godliness and lives that obey God’s word.
- Whilst such an inference is not made by the author, it’s possible that the people had become content with the religious rituals continuing and lost focus on the moral expectations of living as God’s people. This reality seems likely when we get to chapters 9-10. Is there a similar disconnect with us? Another way of asking the question might be: “What does God really want from us? Is it religious performance or godly living?”. Psalm 40:6-8 makes a similar point.

Study 4 | Ezra 9-10 (members booklet page 14)

Introduction

1. Do you think it's appropriate for Christians to grieve over our sin?

- For discussion. In these chapters we encounter Ezra and the Israelites grieving deeply over their sin.
- On the one hand, you could say that because Christ has dealt with our sin, there is no longer a place for guilt/grief. On the other hand, a truly converted heart, who has come to love God, ought to be troubled by their own disobedience, knowing how offensive it is to the God who so loves them.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Ezra 9:1-4.** What is the concern raised and how does Ezra respond to the news?

- After returning to Jerusalem, delivering treasury items and making sacrifices, Ezra is told that the people (including leaders) have not adequately separated themselves from the surrounding (pagan) people groups. This is exemplified in the marriage between Israelite men and women from the surrounding peoples.
- Ezra is seriously devastated by this.

3. **Read Deuteronomy 7:1-6.** What was God's concern with his people mixing with other nations? How does this help us understand the seriousness of the Jews marrying foreign women?

- Understanding the context to all of this will be crucial for seeing why this was such a big problem, and why it's not fundamentally a concern driven by a racist or sexist agenda.
- God's big concern, demonstrated in Deuteronomy was that his people will be singular in their devotion to him and not follow the practices of the surrounding peoples who worshipped false Gods.
- The natural concern is that if families intermarry the idolatrous and pagan religious convictions and practices of the surrounding peoples would become intertwined with the legitimate Israeli practices.

4. Read Ezra 9:5-15. What stands out to you from Ezra's prayer? How does Ezra's recount of Israel's history help expose the seriousness of sin?

- Encourage the group to read through the prayer slowly and notice what stands out. Feel the weight of it.
- It is noticeable how Ezra recounts the history of Israel, and this provides the context of the latest sin. It is in light of God's grace in returning the people from exile to Jerusalem, that this latest sin is so problematic. The people have effectively disobeyed God in the same way that led to the exile in the first instance.
- There is also a strong corporate element to the prayer. Ezra is praying on behalf of the people as a whole, not just the guilty men who had married foreign women.

5. Read Ezra 10:1-4. Chapter 10 records the steps taken by the community after they become convicted of their sin. Why do you think this chapter is included in the book?

- This is undoubtedly a confronting chapter, as we contemplate women and children being sent away (back to their father's household) by the Israelite men. It unhelpfully portrays the problem as being one sided – the fault of the women, when this is very likely not the case.
- The action taken in this chapter (troubling details aside) is a powerful portrayal of genuine repentance and recommitment to the law of the Lord.

Reflect and Apply

6. Have you ever felt weighty grief and shame over your sin, that compares to what Ezra and his generation felt? Why or why not?

- This is a chance to reflect on our own attitude to sin in our lives. It is right for us to feel the weight of our sin, and our culpability, with heavy hearts. Ezra and his generation model this to us, even if we live the other side of the cross. Yes, we can take our guilt and shame to the cross, but we only do so after we've acknowledged our guilt.
- The accusation has been levelled at protestant Christians (and our doctrine of justification by faith) that we've become casual and lax in our approach to sin – because grace and mercy are so readily accessible. Whilst God's grace in Christ is abundant, and accessible, it must never lead to casualness or complacency about sin.

7. At the conclusion of his prayer Ezra prays: “Here we are before you with our guilt, though no one can stand in your presence because of this.” How is our situation before God different to that of Ezra and his peers?

- Ezra recognizes the need to throw himself and the people upon the mercy of God, but he does not have the assurance we have that sin has been finally dealt with on the cross.
- We can ask for God’s mercy, but do so with confidence, knowing what Jesus has done to secure God’s favour. Contrary to Ezra’s word, we can in fact stand in God’s presence, thanks to Jesus (Heb 10:19-22).

8. How do Ezra chapters 9-10 leave us longing for the coming of Christ? What do we have in common with Ezra’s generation that shows us our great need for a saviour

- We keep sinning again and again. We will not attain sinlessness in this life. Many of us make the same mistakes we had confessed and repented from in the past.
- We long for the time when we will no longer be susceptible to sin and weakness.

