

Growth Groups Material
(9 studies on Ezra-Nehemiah)
Apr-Jun 2026
LEADERS GUIDE
Version 2 (20260521): 9 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.

Study 5 | Nehemiah 1-3 (members book page 16)

Introduction

1. Reflect on the series so far. What big themes have emerged from our study of Ezra?

- This is simply a chance to take stock of the series so far and what people have been learning. Some of the themes that have emerged so far include:
 - God's sovereign working through human history and authorities, for the good of his people
 - God fulfilling his promises to restore his people after exile
 - The faithfulness of God's people in involving themselves in the work of building the temple (just as we're called to do the same with the new temple)
 - Ezra's character as a leader, and how it points us to Christ
 - The place of grief over sin, confession and repentance in the life of God's people

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Nehemiah 1:1-2:8.** What is the situation for God's people at this time, and how does Nehemiah respond?

- We're now in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, which is 445 BC, 13 years after Ezra's return. Nehemiah is an important official in Artaxerxes court (a cupbearer).
- He gets report from his brother that Jerusalem is in a bad way. Whilst it is not clear, the troublesome state of affairs in Jerusalem may be related to the consistent opposition the Jews in Jerusalem encountered from the surrounding peoples (described in Ezra 4).
- Nehemiah weeps and mourns over this situation and he prays to God.

3. What does Nehemiah appeal to in his prayer to God in verses 5-11.

- Nehemiah particularly appeals to God's prior promises to his people, issued through Moses (drawing from Deuteronomy 30:1-5) that he would restore them to Jerusalem.
- He is particularly praying for success in approaching King Artaxerxes, whom he will ask for help in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

4. What features of chapter 2 remind us of what we've seen already throughout this series?

- Similar to the decree of King Cyrus in Ezra 1, and King Artaxerxes in Ezra 7, we have another instance of God working powerfully to move a human ruler to bless God's plans and people. Moreover, we see again God's provision for the material building needs through the King's forests.
- Similar to Ezra 1:1 (the Lord roused the Spirit of King Cyrus); and Ezra 7:9 (the gracious hand of God was on Ezra), so also here we read that the gracious hand of God was on Nehemiah (Neh 2:8)

5. From 2:11-3:32 we read about the work to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. **Skim over chapter 3.** Why do you think the author has included so much detail about who did what?

- Note: you might like to review the visual aid on the series webpage (use QR code at front of the book). There is a surprising level of detail in chapter 3, regarding who built which section of the walls.
- Perhaps the answer to why this section is included, is that gives us a glimpse of what God's people ought to look like: unified in purpose and activity, despite being a diverse group. The groups contains people of different Judean towns, different professions, different social standing. It really is a diverse group.
- Like the names of returnees – God saw fit to honour these people by naming them. It speaks to God's recognition of the ordinary, everyday work of building up his kingdom, as well as the supernatural work he does.

Reflect and Apply

6. Nehemiah's heart broke when he heard that God's city was in ruins. What situations in your life, community, or the world break your heart in a similar way? Do you feel that way when God's church suffers or falters?

- This question asks us to reflect on what kinds of things break our heart, in the manner we've observed with Nehemiah. If it's not the health of God's church why is that the case?
- The Jews like Nehemiah had an acute sense that Jerusalem really was God's special place, and his earthly dwelling place (the temple in particular). For Nehemiah, God's reputation was also at stake. The church fulfills the same role in our age. Should we feel aggrieved when the church is attacked, or is corrupted in some way?

7. In Nehemiah's prayer, he is effectively praying "Lord, please do what you have said you will do?". What value is there in repeating God's own words back to him, when we pray?

- It can be helpful to study and call to mind the promises God has made to us already. This can give us confidence and assurance that we are praying things that we know to align with God's will.

8. Chapter 3 gives us a picture of unity in diversity, as the people worked together to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. **Read Ephesians 4:11-16, and Romans 12:3-8.** What similar themes emerge from these passages? What is the building work we are involved in?

- These passages speak to God's people now using their assorted gifts in the common purpose of building up the church.
- The building work we're involved in now looks like 'speaking the truth in love' so that we will see people saved, and fellow believers strengthened.

Study 6 | Nehemiah 4 (members book page 19)

Introduction

1. “The work of growing God’s Kingdom shouldn’t be hard. If it is we’re doing something wrong!”. Discuss

- This introductory question introduces the theme of opposition, which comes up in chapter 4. The statement itself is playing ‘Devil’s advocate’ as prompts us to consider how we ought to interpret opposition to God’s work now.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Nehemiah 4:1-14.** How would you describe Sanballat’s and Tobiah’s reactions to the building of the walls of Jerusalem?

- They clearly aren’t happy that it’s happening. They mock the Jews and tease them that their efforts will amount to nothing.
- As the work progressed, Sanballat, Tobiah and others became furious (v7) and they actively plotted to disrupt the work.

3. **Read Nehemiah 4:15-23.** How would you describe the manner in which the Israelites work in these verses?

- The practice of halving the work force, with one half building and the other half defending is novel. It demonstrates deep commitment to the work and resolve to finish the job.
- It also speaks to the faith of Nehemiah and the people that God was with them. Yet it doesn’t degenerate into lazy naivety – as if God would protect them no matter what they did. They took up the responsibility to use whatever means they had to ensure their building efforts were effective.

4. **Read Nehemiah 5.** What is the problem that emerges? How does Nehemiah lead the people in godly values? What can be learn from this episode about the values that ought to shape God’s people.

- If you are short for time, you could skip over chapter 5.
- The problem that emerges here is one of social inequality, with the nobles and the officials of the community taking financial advantage of more vulnerable, ‘working class’ members of the community.

- Nehemiah urges the nobles and officials to change their ways, and he himself, as the governor, sets the example by not consuming all of the food allocated to him.
- God had created the nation of Israel to function like a just and fair family, in which there was mutual care. Some of the Mosaic laws regulated the way debts and interest were to be handled within Israel, but the people had departed from these.
- Similar principles should apply to the New Testament people of God. There should be no economic burden or hardship imposed on one brother or sister, to the benefit of another. We're to be characterized by love, expressed through care and generosity.

5. Opposition and intimidation towards Nehemiah continues throughout chapter 6. **Read Nehemiah 6:15-16.** To whom does Nehemiah attribute the success of the building project?

- Nehemiah attributes success to God.

Reflect and Apply

6. A friend says to you, "Our church is undertaking a building project in the spirit of Nehemiah. We are trusting God to protect us from any opposition, and to provide for all of our needs." Is this a valid application of what we learn from Nehemiah? How does the New Testament change our understanding of God's promises to us?

- Upon first glance this might seem like a godly attitude. However there are some key things to keep in mind.
- First, Jerusalem held a special place in God's plans. God had promised throughout the prophets that Jerusalem would be rebuilt post-exile. There is no such promise to us relating to any physical building work that we might undertake.
- Second, the building work we undertake now is of a different kind. We're building up the church through the proclamation of the gospel.
- Third, we've seen in Nehemiah 4 how the people both prayed and trusted God, and were wise and diligent in the way they went about the work (with their defence strategies). Alongside praying and trusting God for things, there is a place for taking on the responsibility of resolving problems, rather than passively trusting God.

7. What we can we learn from these chapters about the relationship between God’s power, and our own efforts, in overcoming challenges?

- The combination of building and defending in Nehemiah 4 presents an interesting picture.
- See the final dot pot point in the notes to question 6, above.
- Whilst praying and trusting in God’s sovereignty is paramount – we must avoid extremes which focus only on one side of the equation and avoid the other e.g.:
 - to only pray and completely avoid any careful strategizing and hard work on our part would be irresponsible.
 - failing to pray and trust God, and assuming human decisions and efforts are the only factor is faithless and completely mistaken

8. **Read John 15:19-21, 1 Peter 4:12-17, Matt 5:11-12.** How should we understand hostility experienced as Christians? How should we respond to it?

- We ought not be surprised when the world opposes us if we’re trying to do God’s work. Jesus words in John indicate that they are a sign of belonging to Jesus.
- 1 Peter calls us to rejoice because we are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and can look forward to sharing in his glory. It also urges us to ensure that we’re not suffering for wrongdoing. In other words, we ought to continue to practice godly living so that the only reason we might encounter opposition, is because of our loyalty to Christ.

Study 7 | Nehemiah 7 (members book page 21)

Introduction

1. What do you hope to be remembered for?

- This feels like a tricky chapter, not only to read, but also to digest and apply to Christian living. We decided to include this chapter in the series because there are a number of lists like this throughout Ezra-Nehemiah (and the Old Testament at large). Because we believe all Scripture be God-breathed and useful for us, we must miss something if we don't take the time to consider these types of passages.
- The list is actually a reproduction of what is found in Ezra 2: the list of Jews who returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, in the time of King Cyrus.
- One possible theme which emerges from lists like this is that the people are memorialized by the list itself. God has seen fit to include them in his Word. These people will be remembered by future generation for being the first generation of returned exiles. This prompts us to ask the question of what we hope to be remembered for.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Nehemiah 7.** The list Nehemiah records here is the same as what is found in Ezra 2. Who does this list record? What categories do you notice?

- The list records the people who returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, in around 538 BC, after the edict of King Cyrus.
- The list begins with the general population (verses 6-38), then assorted categories: priests (v39-42), Levites (v43), singers (v44), gatekeepers (v45), temple servants (v46-56), descendants of Solomon's servants (v57-59).
- The categories all relate to official duties around the temple activity, and highlight centrality of restored temple worship to the returned community.

3. What purpose does Nehemiah have for reviewing this list? How do verses 61-65 reinforce this principle?

- Verses 1-5 of the chapter provide the circumstances of this list being consulted. The walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, but the city itself needed to be repopulated.

- As the focal point of the nation, and the location of the temple, Nehemiah was concerned that Jerusalem be populated with genuine Jews – those that could trace their ancestry through Israel and returned exiles.
- Verses 61-65 reinforce this principle – families that could not prove their ancestral ties to Israel were explicitly mentioned. The ‘lay people’ in verses 61-62 may have gone on living amongst the community. However, in the cases of the priests (v63-65) they were disqualified from the priesthood.

4. Why might it have been important for Israelite genealogy to be preserved?

- From the beginning, the people of God, Israel, were to be a holy, distinct community. It was the descendants of Jacob there were the recipients of the promises of God, and to whom the law was given at Mt Sinai. It is the genealogy itself that defined the identity of the community as God’s chosen people.
- Holiness and inclusion by birth may sound racist to our modern ears, but seen in the context of the bigger biblical storyline, it makes a little more sense. This was particularly important for the priestly group (Levites) who were tasked with leading the religious and ceremonial life of the people.
- This is of course different now, in the New Covenant. The condition for entry into God’s saved people is not our national heritage, but faith in Christ.

Reflect and Apply

5. Imagine this list being read and heard by later generations of Israelites, and listeners hearing the name of their great-grandparents being read out. What reaction do you think they would have had?

- For discussion. Perhaps excitement or pride. We can’t underestimate how significant a moment it was, for the first Jews to return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. It was like a ‘second Exodus’, comparable in some ways to the first Exodus out of slavery in Egypt.
- It might be a little like modern Australians seeing family members named in War Memorial honour rolls. The details and reason for remembering these people are different, but it conveys the significance of a generation of names being recorded and remembered.

6. Genealogy is no longer the pre-requisite for inclusion in God's people. **Read 1 Peter 2:1-10.** What are the essential criteria for belonging to God's people now? What is our purpose as God's people?

- The church of Christ are now the people of God. This is a passage which speaks about the church as the new people of God, taking up the imagery and language of the Old Testament.
- Whilst the passage isn't specifically about 'entry criteria' for belonging to God's people, we can see the following:
 - Coming to Him (Jesus) in verse 4.
 - Believing in Him (Jesus) in verse 6
 - Called out of darkness into light in verse 9.
 - Received mercy in verse 10
- The purpose of God's people is the focus of verse 9 : to proclaim the praises of God.

7. Lots of names, including in lists, are named in the New Testament too. See Romans 16, for example. What does this teach us about God's personal knowledge of each one of us?

- It reminds us that God knows each person individually and intimately. He sees our lives of faithful service and he will reward us accordingly. Obviously not every Christian gets named in the Bible, but those that do demonstrate this principle of God's personal knowledge of us.

Study 8 | Nehemiah 8 (members book page 23)

Introduction

1. What was ‘Your One Thing’ from the last Ezra-Nehemiah sermon you heard at church? If you weren’t at the weekend gatherings, what’s ‘One Thing’ that has stood out to you during the series so far?

- This is chance to take stock of the series so far. What has stood out to people from the series so far, especially the first three weeks in Nehemiah?
- One incidental purpose in asking this question is to reinforce the importance of our ‘Your One Thing’ segment in our gatherings. Our aim is for people to grow more confident and comfortable in personal reflection on what they are learning from God’s word and sharing that with others.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Nehemiah 8.** Describe what happens in these verses? What is being read from?

- Ezra and the other priests read and teach from the Book of the Law (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). Note on verse 8 – the notion of the law being translated seems strange. It may be that many of the people spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew as the first language.
- The people demonstrate a high level of diligence and engagement as the law is read – they listened attentively (verse 3).
- As the law is read the people respond in worship (v6), they reinstate the festival of tabernacles in verses 13-18. (c.f. Leve 23:33-43).
- Verses 9-12 describe the reactions of the people to what was being read: first weeping, then at the exhortation of the leaders, celebrating.

3. What might have led the people to weep (8:9)? What would be the grounds for celebration and joy, that the Levites encourage?

- The weeping may have been because the people may have been learning, more thoroughly than before, about the history of sin and rebellion that marked the history of Israel. Perhaps they also felt convicted that they themselves had not maintained the practices of the law given to Israel at Sinai.
- The celebration and joy is responsive to being reminded of God’s holy and gracious character in setting his love upon the nation of Israel, and the many acts of salvation that he has worked for the good of his people. The return from Exile,

would have been the latest of these, confirming in the mind of this generation how they truly were God's people.

4. **Read Nehemiah 9.** How does the structure of this corporate confession contrast God's goodness with Israel's sin?

- The confession reads a bit like a chronological history of God's dealings with Israel. As it happened in history, this story shows the cycle of God's goodness towards Israel, only for them to rebel and sin against God. The word 'But' in verses 16, 26, 28 mark some of these transitions.

Reflect and Apply

5. Broadly speaking, chapters 8-10 speak of celebration, mourning and then commitment. How do each of these three things continue to characterize an appropriate Christian response to God? What do we celebrate? What do we mourn? What do we commit to?

- Following the reading of the law in chapter 8, the confession of sin in chapter 9, chapter 10 sees the people making oaths of commitment to God, to obey the Mosaic law.
- Despite the very different stage of salvation history that we find ourselves in, we have much in common with the people of these chapters. Just like them we hear God's word, including together as a saved people.
- As we digest God's word we hear of God's amazing mercy towards us in Christ, which causes us to celebrate. We celebrate and rejoice in God's love for us, our eternal hope etc.
- However, God's word also convicts of our sin and we see what it cost Jesus to pay our debt. This ought to bring a measure of grief and remorse associated with our sin. As we continue in the Christian life, our sin remains a disappointment and source of grief which we continually confess and repent of.
- Finally, as saved people, we commit to living God's way by his Spirit. The shape of our obedience is not guided by the Old Testament laws, as was the case in Nehemiah 10, but the many other sources of moral instruction in the Bible (including in the New Testament).

6. Consider the shape of a Christian gathering now, like church. What elements of Nehemiah 8-10 should we expect to continue? What will be different? What explains these differences?

- As noted above, there are many similarities. We'd ought to expect the following to remain central:
 - the reading and explanation of God's word to be central
 - the corporate confession of sin
 - the celebration of salvation (perhaps through singing).
- Things that have changed would include:
 - the celebration of Jewish festival as in 8:13-18. Though we have our own special 'holidays' now like Easter and Christmas and rituals like Baptism and the Lords Supper
 - the use of binding vows of commitment that we see in chapter 10. We live under a different covenant which is ruled by grace not law.

7. Should we be more or less confident about receiving God's mercy compared to Ezra and Nehemiah's generation? Why or why not?

- We can be fully confident of receiving God's mercy because of the finished work of Christ on the cross (1 Tim 1:15, Romans 5:6-8). Whilst Ezra and Nehemiah's generation would have known and been confident in God's faithful character, they have not seen the full revelation of God's saving work as we have.
- This confidence ought not lead to complacency though.

Study 9 | Nehemiah 10-13 (members book page 25)

Introduction

1. Have you ever promised to do something but failed to deliver? How did you feel about your failure? What caused it?

- For discussion. Invite the group to share their own examples if they have any. This will help us identify with the events of chapter 13, as we'll see the Israelites breaking their own promises that they had made to God in chapter 10.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Nehemiah 9:38, 10:28-39.** What is behind the vows being made? What specifics vows are made by the people? Use the table below to record your answers

- It might be helpful to review last week's study. The vow emerges from the corporate confession and conviction of sin that arose as the Mosaic law was being read and taught. 10:1-29 describes the people making the vow

Verses	Vow
10:30	Not inter marrying with the surrounding peoples (c.f. Ezra 9-10)
10:31	More diligent Sabbath-keeping. Not buying or selling from foreign merchants (who wouldn't have adhered to the Sabbath), and reinstating the 7 th year Jubilee practices relating to the land, and debt cancellation
10:32-39	Proper financial and material support to maintain temple worship activity.

3. **Read Nehemiah 13:4-31.** Referring to each of the three vows referred to above, identify the verses in chapter 13, which describe those vows being broken. How was the vow broken? Who broke it? You may wish to use the additional table below:

- Note, verses 11:1-12:26 describes the assorted people who repopulated Jerusalem, along with the names of people fulfilling assorted temple offices
- 12:27-43 describes a ceremony to dedicate the finished wall.
- Chapter 13:6 indicates Nehemiah went back to Babylon after 12 years of the governor. Some of the problems he describes in the chapter are things he discovered upon a subsequent return to Jerusalem.

Vow (Ch 10)	Vow Broken (Ch 13)
10:30	13:23-28 people had intermarried.
10:31	13:15-22 – people were working the Sabbath.
10:32-39	The house of the Lord, and it's careful management, had been neglected. 13:4:13 but see also 12:44-13:3 for important context. The Priest Eliashib mismanaged the housing of the provisions for the Levites (including allowing a foreigner into the holy rooms). The Levites and temple workers weren't adequately provided for so returned to their own fields.

4. How does Nehemiah react to the sin of the people? Read verses 11, 17, 19, 21, 22, 25, 28 and 30, and then summarize his reaction. Do you think Nehemiah's response is justified?

- Nehemiah rebukes the guilty people and takes action to remedy the situation. This is commendable leadership, as he seeks to hold the Jews accountable to the law, and the vows they had made.
- However, some of Nehemiah's actions are very severe – see verse 25
- We also see Nehemiah calling upon God to remember him with favour for what he has done (v14, 22, 31).

- Nehemiah's repeated calling upon God feels a bit self-interested. Is he trying to distinguish himself from the others – an innocent, godly person amongst the guilty, ungodly? IT

Reflect and Apply

5. As we've charted the trajectory of the people's behaviour from chapter 10 (vow) to chapter 13 (sin – vow's broken), what have we learnt about human nature? Is anything different for Christians, compared to Nehemiah's generation?

- God's people, despite their good intentions have fallen back into sin. This is what humanity is like – weakened by our sinful nature.
- Christians will continue to experience failure, but have the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to help us grow in consistent obedience.

6. In many ways, the story of Nehemiah ends with disappointment. How does this train us to long for the coming of Christ? What unfulfilled hopes from Ezra-Nehemiah does Jesus resolve?

- There are so many ways that this story overlaps with ours. Like those in Ezra/Nehemiah we look back to God's incredible saving works, and try to live in light of it, yet often fail.
- Some of the unfulfilled hopes which Jesus fulfills might include:
 - A people of God who are truly obedient to their God (perfectly fulfilled by the true Israelite, Jesus)
 - Assurance of God's forgiveness in the light of our sin
 - A reliable sacrificial system that will deal with our sin once for all.
 - A covenant relationship that is not conditional upon our obedience.
 - What other themes have you discovered?

7. Think back over the series as a whole:

- a. What new things have you learnt?
- b. How have you been surprised?
- c. What encouragement will you take with you as you follow Jesus?
- d. What links to the person and work of Christ have you identified?

- For your own discussion. Encourage the group to settle on 1-2 big things that they've learnt and been impacted by.

Praying for our *Lifeboat lists*

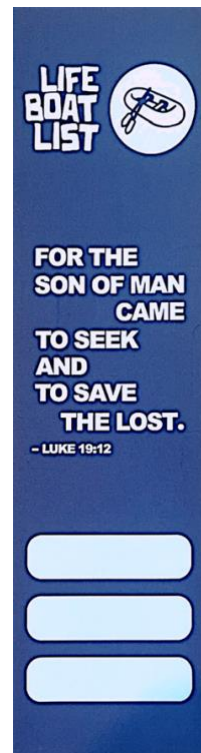


We know that everyone's greatest need in life is to be reconciled with God through Jesus so that their sins can be forgiven. We want lost people to be saved, and know the eternal hope of salvation, rather than perish under God's judgment.

A tool we use to help us pray regularly is our *lifeboat list*. These are bookmarks upon which we can list three people that we're deliberately praying for and actively working towards sharing Jesus with.

In our groups, it would be excellent to share with each other who is on our lifeboat lists, and pray together for each of these people, and our efforts to reach them.

You might like to use the next two pages to record the name of the people you are praying for.



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