

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ezra-Nehemiah: A New Beginning

Brokenness is a fact of life. A finger slips, and the milk jug smashes on the kitchen floor, or the ornament falls off the shelf and breaks. Much of the time the pieces are swept up and put out with the rubbish. Some items, however, are so valuable that they are put together again, often in a slow, painstaking operation! They are restored because they're precious.

People get broken too. Not just *physically* (though that's an inevitable part of human experience), but *emotionally* – through loss or disappointment, or pain of various kinds. People also get broken *spiritually* – afflicted, perplexed, discouraged. Ever felt any of those things? Ever felt *broken* and in need of restoration?

Brokenness is a fact of life because we live in a broken world. We see it among our friends and in our neighbourhood – in broken relationships, shattered marriages, and splintered families. And then in the wider world too: murders in Iraq, fighting in Afghanistan, ethnic cleansing in Sudan, tensions between Muslims and Jews. We're broken people in a broken world.

Of course, the great news of the Christian faith is that God is in the business of mending brokenness – supremely, of course, through Jesus' death, so that our broken relationship with God could be mended. That's the ultimate restoration. But at the emotional and spiritual levels too, we read in Scripture that 'the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit' and that God will not despise 'a broken and contrite heart' (Psalm 51:17). He will not break the bruised reed; he does not snuff out the smouldering wick (see Isaiah 42:3). When we're broken, God doesn't throw us away. He puts us back together again, tiny piece by tiny piece, if necessary; and he'll do it over many years, if necessary – because he's in the restoration business.

Ezra and Nehemiah speak to our need for restoration, our need for a fresh, renewed relationship with God. These books tell the story of how God restored his broken people after they came home from exile in Babylon. Ezra 9:9 sums up one of the major themes of the books: 'Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.'

As we go through these books, we'll see that God's restoration deals with very *practical* matters, like rebuilding the broken Dung Gate in the city wall, and it deals with very *spiritual* matters like confessing sin. It deals with *both* these things in a way that suggests there's not much difference between what we think of as the 'practical' and what we think of as the 'spiritual'. Ezra and Nehemiah will also show us that brokenness needs renewal at the *individual* level and the *corporate* level – personally and together. But before we come to those lessons, it will be worth saying four things to introduce Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. One Book

First of all, we should read Ezra and Nehemiah as *one book*. They are separated in our English Bibles; but, in fact, they were originally written as one long work. As we go through Ezra and Nehemiah, we'll see that they're made up of different types of literature: some personal memoirs, some lists, some family trees, some letters; but they're *one book* and they tell *one story*.

2. Real Events

The second thing to say is that Ezra and Nehemiah write about *real events*. A number of times, they record dates, and we can

check out those dates fairly accurately. against events in ancient history. When the book opens in Ezra 1, the date is about 538 BC; Nehemiah ends just over 100 years later, in 433 BC (see the basic timeline attached with these notes).

Of course, Ezra and Nehemiah need to be placed into the longer story of God's dealings with his people, beginning with Abraham and his family, moving through Moses and the exodus, Joshua and the entrance into the promised land, and the establishment of the kingship with Saul, David, and Solomon. After Solomon died, the kingdom divided into two – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. God allowed Assyria to defeat the northern kingdom in 722 BC, and Assyria in turn was swallowed up by Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar, who set his sights on the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital in Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 36 picks up the story at this point, describing the period of Old Testament history we know as the 'exile' (2 Kings 24-25 tell the same story in slightly more detail). Nebuchadnezzar first attacks Jerusalem when Jehoiakim is king (2 Chronicles 36:5-8). It's at this time that Daniel is taken to Babylon (see Daniel 1:1-7). Nebuchadnezzar comes back some years later when Jehoiachin is king (2 Chronicles 36:9-10). It's at this point (598 BC) that Ezekiel (along with other significant people) is led off to Babylon (see Ezekiel 1:1-3). While Ezekiel ministers to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah stays behind in Jerusalem, where Zedekiah is installed as a puppet king (2 Chronicles 36:11-14).

Although Jeremiah warned Zedekiah that the exile was God's judgment on his people, and that to rebel against Babylon was to rebel against God himself, Zedekiah was swayed by his political advisers (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). Nebuchadnezzar marched back to Jerusalem in 586 BC; Zedekiah's punishment was to see his sons killed, after which he had his eyes gouged out, and was himself taken to Babylon. The temple was pulled to the ground, and Jerusalem was all but destroyed. About fifty

years go by, during which Babylon slowly crumbles, and Persia takes over (2 Chronicles 36:22-23, and see Ezra 1:1). So, at the start of Ezra, Cyrus of Persia is king; he makes a decree in 538 BC which allows captured people to return to their lands. Chapters 1 to 6 tell of a first wave of exiles who return and (eventually) rebuild the temple in 516 BC. More than fifty years then go by (during which the events which are described in the book of Esther happen in Persia) before Ezra the scribe comes on the scene in Ezra 7, in 458 BC. Then about twelve years later, in 445 BC, Nehemiah arrives from Persia to rebuild the walls of the city. The last date in Nehemiah is 433 BC, which brings us very close to the end of the Old Testament period.

3. Restored People

The third thing to say is that they tell the story of a *restored people*. Ezra and Nehemiah are sometimes used to illustrate lessons about leadership or building projects; indeed, we'll see that there may be ways in which they are models of leadership – in the priorities they set, and in how they go about things. But they have much more to tell us about the restoration of *all* of God's people.

There are different dimensions to this restoration. Ezra 1-6 focuses on the restored *temple*. But bricks and mortar are not enough, so in chapters 7-10 we'll see the people being brought under a restored *rule*. That brings us to the first part of Nehemiah, where we come back to bricks and mortar: restoring the walls of the city, in Nehemiah 1-7. Then, once again, the people can build a wall around their city, but they also need to build a wall around their lives: the new city requires a new *society*, which we read about in Nehemiah 8-13.

So, Ezra and Nehemiah are about the renewal of the people of God. They're not just about a return to Judah, but a return to *God*. They're not just about the people rebuilding the temple and the walls, but about the people rebuilding their *lives*. And they're not just concerned with *individual*

restoration; they're concerned with the restoration of the people of God *as a whole*.

4. Sovereign God

Fourthly and finally, we'll see that Ezra and Nehemiah teach us, again and again, that *God is sovereign*. In other words, he's in charge! While they were in exile, they were promised restoration: Jeremiah spoke about God making a new covenant with the people (Jeremiah 31:31-34); Ezekiel had a vision of dry bones coming to life (Ezekiel 37:1-4). But it would be *God* who would do it. He *wants* to do it because he is a faithful God, a merciful God, a covenant-keeping God. And he *can* do it because he is a sovereign God.

And he's not just the God of Israel, he's the God of all nations. There'll be kings and leaders, presidents and prime ministers; he raises them up and he brings them down, for his own glory and his own purposes. We won't always know why, but we can always be confident he will be faithful to his people and sovereign over his world. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 17 September 2006

Ezra-Nehemiah: Timeline of events

586 BC	Fall of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:15-20)
539 BC	Persia defeats Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:20-21)
538 BC	Cyrus, King of Persia, allows exiles to return (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4)
516 BC	The temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt (Ezra 6:13-18)
458 BC	Ezra arrives in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:8-9)
445 BC	Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1)
433 BC	Close of the book (Nehemiah 13:6)

Note that since we are looking at a time of history before Christ (BC) the numbers work backwards; the further back in time we go, the higher the numbers are!

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ezra-Nehemiah: Outline

17 September 2006

1. Introduction: A New Beginning

The new temple (Ezra 1-6)

1 October 2006

2. The return of the exiles (Ezra 1-2)

15 October 2006

3. The rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3-6)

The new rule (Ezra 7-10)

22 October 2006

4. The responsibility of the scribe (Ezra 7-8)

29 October 2006

5. The reformation of the people (Ezra 9-10)

The new city (Nehemiah 1-7)

5 November 2006

6. The resolve of the governor (Nehemiah 1-2)

19 November 2006

7. The reconstruction of the walls (Nehemiah 3-7)

The new society (Nehemiah 8-13)

26 November 2006

8. The renewal of the covenant (Nehemiah 8-10)

17 December 2006

9. The restoration of the nation (Nehemiah 11-13)