

EZRA 1; 3–7; NEHEMIAH 2; 4–6; 8

The following “Witnessing Christ from the Old Testament” study covers **Ezra 1; 3–7; Nehemiah 2; 4–6; 8.**

[You can find the LDS outline of study and resources here.](#)

LDS Study Focus

LDS study material follows the theme, “*I am doing a great work.*”

The Jewish people had been held captive in Babylonia for about 70 years. They had lost Jerusalem and the temple, and many had forgotten their commitment to God’s law. But God had not forgotten them. In fact, He had declared through His prophet, “I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return” ([Jeremiah 29:10](#)). True to this prophecy, the Lord did make a way for the Jews to return, and He raised up servants who accomplished “a great work” for His people ([Nehemiah 6:3](#)). These servants included a governor named Zerubbabel, who oversaw the rebuilding of the house of the Lord; Ezra, a priest and scribe who turned the hearts of the people back to the Lord’s law; and Nehemiah, a later governor of Judah who led the work of rebuilding the protective walls around Jerusalem. They met opposition, of course, but also received assistance from unexpected sources. Their experiences can inform and inspire ours, because we too are doing a great work. And like theirs, our work has much to do with the house of the Lord, the law of the Lord, and the spiritual protection we find in Him.

Biblical Focus

God revealed through his prophets that the captivity of Judah would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:12, Daniel 9:2). God preserved a remnant to fulfill his promises to Abraham and the world. In future studies of the prophets, you will read many dual prophecies about Israel’s present circumstances and the salvation that would come about through the Messiah.

The time of Ezra and Nehemiah is exciting as God’s children start to see his promises come true. However, these books are also filled with disappointments that left them and us longing for the Messiah and the complete restoration of God’s kingdom at the end of time.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain no flashy miracles like those we enjoyed in 1 and 2 Kings. Instead, God works behind the scenes and provides for his people through ordinary means.

The book of Ezra is a continuation of 2 Chronicles, which ended with an excerpt from Cyrus’ decree to let the Jews go back to Jerusalem. Ezra, a priest who returned to Jerusalem 80 years after the first exiles had returned, wrote the decree. In the first six chapters of his book, Ezra recorded the return of the first exiles. Then, in chapter seven, he described his activities some years later.

EZRA 1

Judah had failed to keep their covenant with God, and because of their sin and unbelief, God exiled his people into a foreign land. Now, everything they left behind had been destroyed, including the temple. In most cases, it would have been unrealistic to hope that God could restore a country taken almost entirely captive. Yet, God had promised that his people would one day return to the Promised Land and reestablish their nation. (See **Isaiah 44:28–45:6** and **Jeremiah 25:11,12; 29:10.**)

The Persians took over the Babylonian Empire in Daniel 5. King Cyrus supported many cultures and religions to gain the people's favor. Although they were most likely not believers, God used Cyrus and Artaxerxes just as other rulers in the past. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1). Therefore, God is sovereign over all and is willing and able to use those who are evil to accomplish good.

God's children had been in exile for 70 years. Now it was time for God to restore their home.

Conversation Starters:

- **Can you think of other Bible stories where God used evil to accomplish good? How was this true on Good Friday?**
- **Have you noticed times in modern history when God used evil to accomplish good? How about in your life?**
- **When earthly rulers seem to hold sway and appear invincible, what truth must Christians always bear in mind?**

Sharing Personally:

In a world full of political chaos, evil, and uncertainty, I am comforted by God's influence over heathen kings in Ezra. God determined when the Israelites would be taken captive and when they would be set free. God silently worked behind the scenes to accomplish his will.

We may not know or understand the future of our earthly nation, but we know who rules over it.

Who are you placing your trust in today?

"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1).

EZRA 3–7

Ezra Rebuilds the Temple

Upon Judah's return home, their priority was to rebuild the temple. The exile was not just estrangement from the land. God's people were also cut off from the temple and the means of grace. Just as their sin separated them from the physical representation of God, our sin also separates us from his presence. Sin is captivity from which we must be rescued.

Cries for joy filled the land, and the Israelites' hearts were filled with hope as the temple's foundations were laid. God miraculously kept his promise to rescue and restore his people! Surely, he would also keep his promise to send the Messiah and restore his reign over all nations!

But the community of elders who had known Solomon's temple wept bitterly. Those who had seen Solomon's temple before the exile knew they would never restore it to its former glory. Previously, when they had built the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, God filled them with the smoky cloud of his presence. But at this dedication, the cloud was absent.

The prophecies in Ezekiel 43 about the restored temple lead the hearers to imagine something beautiful. Clearly, this temple was lacking and would cause the people to look forward to a better and more complete restoration of the temple. This rebuilding was only a partial fulfillment of God's promises.

The lackluster temple led the people to long for a more trustworthy and better dwelling place of God on earth.

Conversation Starters:

- **Compare and contrast Israel's captivity to humanity's captivity to sin.**
- **The people built the temple when the Babylonian captivity ended. Consider Jesus' description of himself in John 2:19. How did humanity's imprisonment to sin end? "Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."**

Sharing Personally:

When the Israelites rebuilt the temple after the Babylonian captivity in the book of Ezra, it was found lacking. Its beauty paled in comparison to Solomon's temple, the ark of the covenant was absent, and worse, God did not fill it with his smoky presence as he had done in the past. Ezra's temple left Israel waiting for a different dwelling of God on earth.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple. In him was the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9–10). He was the temple (John 2:21), the Great High Priest, the Sacrifice, and the Curtain, who gives us unhindered access to God (Hebrews 10:20–21).

We no longer need to wonder if any temple built by human hands is enough because Jesus is!

EZRA 8–10

The reading plan does not include Ezra 8–10, but the chapters are worth summarizing and acknowledging. Ezra continued to lead the proper setup of the temple. However, his work came to a screeching halt in chapter nine when he was made aware that many of the Israelites had taken heathen wives (a practice which had been forbidden in Deuteronomy 7:3–4 and proven toxic by King Solomon in 1 Kings 11). Repentance ensued, and divorce was encouraged. The end of the book is quite anticlimactic and leaves the problem unresolved and the reader unsettled.

Would Israel finally get their act together and be the covenant nation God had asked them to be?

Note the repetition of the phrase “the gracious hand of our God is on us.” Ezra knew the challenges facing anyone who wanted to return to Jerusalem. First, they would have to leave their homes, jobs, and extended families. They would go to an unknown place, still unfortified at this time, where they would perform “menial” tasks at the temple. Only if God touched a person’s heart could they see the great spiritual benefit of being near God’s temple and have a willingness to leave the only life they had ever known to return to Jerusalem.

Our LDS friends also have difficulty seeing the benefits of leaving behind the only culture and spiritual content they have ever known. They need to see that the “gracious hand of the Lord” is also for them.

NEHEMIAH 2; 4-6; 8

Nehemiah is the companion book to Ezra and continues the story of Israel's restoration. Again, God used the secular world to fulfill his promises. Another Persian king pledged resources to help restore Israel. One unique aspect of this book is the peek into Nehemiah's prayer life. The inclusion of his prayers shows the essential attitude of his heart. He depended on God, believed that God heard him, cared for him, and had the power to act.

After the decree of Cyrus, 50,000 Israelites returned to Judah and began rebuilding the temple. But unfortunately, they got discouraged and quit. God then sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to finish the project. God also sent Ezra to help restore their spiritual hunger. Finally, Nehemiah tells his story in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes.

By now, Persia had replaced Babylon as the region's great power, and the Persians ruled with a different means of control. **The commitment of the Persians was to resettle captured people in their native lands.** Conquered peoples could act with a high degree of autonomy as long as they supported the state and paid their taxes. As we start the book of Nehemiah, God is about to instigate another move back to the Promised Land.

The book falls into several divisions. The first six chapters cover the *rebuilding* of the wall, while chapters 7 through 10 deal with *renewing* Jerusalem's worship. The final chapters address the *repopulation* and *revival* of God's people.

As preparations to rebuild Jerusalem began, the words of the prophet Isaiah would have caused them to wonder if this was the "great" restoration God had promised (Isaiah 60).

Conversation Starters:

- **Study Nehemiah's prayers. What else can you learn about prayer?**
- **Read [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#) and [Nehemiah 2:4](#). What does it mean to "pray continually?"**
- **Read Isaiah 60. Zion is another name for Jerusalem and another name for eternal life with God. What prophecies of eternal life with God are you looking forward to the most?**

NEHEMIAH 4-6

Whenever believers act in faith, Satan always opposes God's work. Here Satan used taunting, ridicule, public scorn, intimidation, and slander to undercut Nehemiah's leadership and cause the people to despair. Nehemiah responded with more prayer and by setting up a military defense.

Conversation Starters:

- Read [Nehemiah 4:14-15](#). Of what did Nehemiah remind the people? Who got the credit for frustrating their enemies?

NEHEMIAH 8

Responding to the Word ([Nehemiah 8:1-18](#))

It was time for the Word of the Lord to return to the people. As Ezra read scripture, the law cut the hearts of the people. The law convicted them and showed them their sins and failures. Guilt moved the people to respond with repentant weeping. The law did its job. It was a mirror to show them their sins and their need for salvation outside of themselves.

Again and again, the leaders encouraged the people to focus on the gospel message. God had kept his promise to preserve a remnant and restore Israel. God forgave all their sins. The time for mourning their sins had ended, and they could rejoice in the Lord. Grace prompted a response of a grand celebration.

Conversation Starter:

- How does the law influence our response to the gospel?

Sharing Personally

When Ezra read the Word of God to the people in Nehemiah 8, they mourned and wept over their sins. Their sorrow was so great that they almost missed the gospel of forgiveness. Over and over again, the leaders proclaimed that the time for sorrow over sin had passed. God had removed their sins. Forgiveness and restoration with God were theirs!

Sometimes Satan uses guilt to weigh me down. When I fully recognize my sinfulness and unworthiness before God, I can feel crippled with despair and miss the gospel. Praise God for sending those who can remind me of his unconditional forgiveness. God has forgiven my sins, and I am now free to live rejoicing in my salvation!

NEHEMIAH 9–13

The reading plan does not include the book's concluding chapters, but they are worth nothing. Chapter 9 gives a fascinating confession of Israel's continued rebellion and God's mercy and faithfulness. Time after time, the people were disobedient, but God continued to keep his covenant despite their faithlessness.

In chapter 10, the people make a binding agreement with a curse and an oath to follow God's law, explicitly mentioning intermarriage with foreigners, the Sabbath, tithes, and offerings. Would this generation finally be the generation that would live up to God's expectations? Would they be able to keep their covenants?

Yet soon after the people renewed their covenants, they broke them. Chapter 13 lists one frustrating situation after another. The temple wasn't being run properly, the people were profaning the Sabbath, and the men of Judah were marrying heathens. The book ends with Nehemiah beating the people and pulling out their hair. The great revival ended in disappointment. The people continued disregarding God's commands, and their leaders could not force them to obey. Orders and covenants were powerless to change the hearts of the people.

But hope wasn't lost. In Ezekiel, God promised: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

And later,

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

Ezekiel 37: 21–23

Sharing Personally:

What is a covenant worth anyway? Consider the covenants the Israelites made with God in Nehemiah chapter 10 and the mess they made of those covenants by chapter 13. It's the same story throughout all of Israel's history. They were utterly unable to hold up their side of the covenant.

But God would rescue them!

Thus saith the Lord God; "Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwelling places, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God."

Ezekiel 37:21–23

*What a comfort it is knowing that it **all depends on God!***