

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH



REBUILD & RESTORE

(12 BIBLE STUDIES)

EXAMINATION

BIBLE STUDIES

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THE SMALL PRINT

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Your Commitment

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

Your Contribution

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

Your Preparation

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don't help you, simply don't use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to the book. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started with these studies!

Your Leadership

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure
Spring 2019*

INTRODUCING “EZRA & NEHEMIAH”

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah have been widely popular source material for Christian groups and Churches of late because of the parallels with our own journey of rebuilding and restoration as we emerge from the pandemic. By way of introduction, I offer here some reflection of lessons learned:

The History: The background to these books is the exile of God's people. God warned this would happen as a result of disobedience as far back as Deut 28-30. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was exiled around 722BC by Assyria (see 2 Kings 17) and they resettled a cultural mix of people into the land of Israel. These people were the early Samaritans. The Southern Kingdom (the tribes of Judah & Benjamin) fared somewhat better but were also exiled from around 605BC until 539BC. This exile started small but happened in several waves. It brought to fulfilment the words of Jeremiah, who had prophesied that the exile would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25 & 29). Ezra and Nehemiah (a single book in the Jewish Canon) mark the end of the exile as the people are begin returning to the Promised Land. The first group was allowed to return by King Cyrus (of the Persian empire) to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel and Jeshua (the priest) were all part of this first wave (Ezra 1-6) and Zerubbabel saw to completion the work on the temple. Later they were followed by Ezra who led the people in a process of spiritual restoration (Ezra 7-10). Nehemiah (who held a prominent position in the administration of King Artaxerxes) then received a report about the state of Jerusalem and was moved to prayerfully seek God. His subsequent proposal to the King was met with favour, and he saw the work completed on the restoration of the city walls. Ezra again led them through a process of spiritual renewal as the people of God assembled to read the law, make a new agreement and dedicate the walls to God.

#1: God takes the initiative: The beginning of the book of Ezra leaves us with little doubt that the end of the exile is God's initiative. Indeed, we are told that *“God moved the heart of Cyrus King of Persia”* (1:1). He was in the 1st year of his reign and arachnologists have attested to Cyrus' policy of encouraging exiles to return to their homelands. Champions like Zerubbabel and Jeshua soon rise to the fore, but it was most definitely God, working through a pagan King, that sets this in motion. Their enemies work hard to derail the work, but the most they achieved was delay (4:24). God was clearly at work. This reminds me of some words of the Pharisee Gamaliel who said ³⁸ *...For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.* **Acts 5:38b-39.** God had promised 70 years of exile, but it was now over. God was bringing His people back to the land, just as He had promised He would.

#2: God uses People who trust Him: When he heard about the state of Jerusalem Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed to His God. Nehemiah 1 records his incredible prayer in which he praised God, wrestled with His promises, and asked Him to grant him favour in the presence of the King. Nehemiah sought God in prayer. but He also had a plan for how to proceed. This involved coming before the King with sadness of heart which was forbidden and therefore very risky. God granted him favour and the King gave his blessing to go back and restore the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah works with perseverance and diligence to bring the work to completion, and he brings the same attitude to the state of the Nations spiritual renewal. He was zealous for God and worked hard to encourage the people to return to God and keep their promises to Him. In Ezra the prophets Haggai & Zechariah were also men of faith who challenged the people to get on with building God's house after it had ground to a halt in the face of strong opposition. Haggai in particular challenged the people, because they were busy working on their own homes while God's house remained a ruin. Zerubbabel & Jeshua the Priest are mentioned by name as they obeyed God in restarting the work.

#3: Teamwork and Opposition: Nehemiah 3 communicates the sense of teamwork enjoyed by those who worked on rebuilding the walls. It was not a job for the professionals but was undertaken by all kinds of people including rulers, priests, goldsmiths, servants, guards, merchants and perfume-makers. The wall was to protect God's people, but it was no use at all unless it was not completed all the way around. **It was therefore only as strong as its weakest point!** It reminds me a lot of the New Testament metaphor of the Body of Christ. Failure to play our part in this body has a huge impact on the whole.

Secondly, opposition is one of the strongest themes in these books. In Ezra this opposition comes from those who inhabited the land during the exile which included a cultural mix of peoples who were resettled there by the Assyrians. In Nehemiah, the main culprits are Tobiah (the Ammonite) and Sanballat (the Horonite) and they work tirelessly to undermine the rebuilding on the walls. Ultimately their efforts fail, but the people of God end up having to hold weapons in one hand whilst working with the other to protect themselves. Nehemiah also faces some opposition from within his own group after the people cry out against the exploitation of their nobles and officials. Anyone who has played a part in the work of building God's Kingdom knows that opposition is to be expected!

#4: Spiritual renewal crucial: Buildings were never the end goal, but merely a vehicle to facilitate the people's relationship with God. In this regard, the temple was a symbol of God's presence and it was the place where they came to meet with Him and bring their sacrifices. Some people however were understandably upset (Ezra 3:11-13, Haggai 2:2-3) by the rebuilding of the temple. It was never going to live up to the lavish temple built by Solomon. The prophet Zechariah (4:8-10) spoke strongly against this telling God's people not to despise small beginnings, while Haggai prophesied that the glory of the new house (in which one day the Son of God would walk) would be greater than the former (Haggai 2:9)! The celebration following the rebuilding of the altar (Ezra 3:1-6) and the latter part of both Ezra (chapters 7-10) and Nehemiah (8-13) describe big gatherings of God's people. These times must have been hugely significant for God's people as they praised God, read His law, confessed their sin and made new promises to live in obedience to God. **Large corporate gatherings can often be big turning points in our faith, but the real test of renewal is in the day-to-day things further down the line.**

#5: Ultimately fulfilled in Jesus: There was also a continuing cycle of disappointment. The rebuilding work was very significant but the people's willingness to obey soon proved to be a huge let-down. When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after a stint back in Babylon, he is very discouraged by what he finds. He finds himself having to bring reform to the temple (following provision of a room to Tobiah), to their giving (which they had neglected), to their observance of the Sabbath (which was being abused) and to their relationships (in intermarrying women from other nations). These reforms contain overtones of the arrival of Jesus at this same temple (Matt 21:12-17). Nehemiah achieves much but ultimately points forward to the ministry of Jesus. In his final grievance (related to their relationships) we find Nehemiah rebuking, cursing, beating them up and pulling out their hair (13:25). They had expressly made promises to God about all these things (10:30-39), but these promises had not lasted long. The need of the hour was pointed to the fulfilment of prophecies like Ezekiel 36:24-27 in which God said that God would give His people not just the desire but the will to obey. On our own we will simply always fail but through the Spirit that lives in all who believe in Him God moves us to obey. Of course, there will be an ongoing battle to choose to *live by the spirit* rather than *by the flesh* but for the first time God would put His Spirit in His people and move us to follow Him (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

**To God be the glory;
Steve McClure Autumn 2021**

STUDY 1 – EZRA 1-2 – GOD’S INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION: For 70 years God’s people had lived in exile, but now God moves to shake things up! He moves the heart of King Cyrus to allow His people to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. The King gave a clear mandate which also ensured that they had all the resources they needed.

SETTING THE SCENE: What is it like to live in a place that feels foreign to you (consider your own experiences or those of others)? In what ways might this have been similar and/or different to what it meant for God’s people to live in exile? How would 70 years exile have changed the people of God?

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TO OBEY OR NOT TO OBEY (DEUT 28): Before God brought His people into the land, He made clear what would happen if they obeyed (v1-14) or disobeyed (v15-28). How do you respond to the clarity with which God sets out what would happen either way (esp. v49-52 & v64-68)? How might the people have received the tone of inevitability that in time they would disobey (e.g., 30:1-10)?

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FALL OF JERUSALEM (2 CHRON 36:15-23): How does this account describe God’s reasons for carrying His people into exile in Babylon (v15-16)? In what state did the Babylonians leave the city of Jerusalem and why is this significant for us in Ezra & Nehemiah?

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LETTER TO THE EXILES (JEREMIAH 29:1-14): God intended the exile to be a period of 70 years (see contrast with Hananiah’s prophecy of 2 years in 28:1-4): how would the promises contained in v10-14 have helped God’s people to settle down and fully engage with their new context (v4-8)? What surprises you about God’s instructions and what parallels are there for our context today?

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CYRUS’ PROCLAMATION (EZRA 1:1, 2 CHRON 36:22-23): After the Persian empire came to power, King Cyrus frees the exiles: how do you understand this idea that God moved His heart (or

stirred up his spirit ESV)? Why are Isaiah 44:28, 45:1, 13 (written some 150 years before Ezra) so significant in this regard? In what ways did this proclamation fulfil God's word to Jeremiah?

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THE EDICT (1:2-4): What particularly stands out to you from the edict put in writing by King Cyrus? Why do you think that he begins by praising the *God of all heaven* before then declaring that God has appointed him to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem? What are the hallmarks of God's hand in this?

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RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE (1:5-11): Why was it so important for God to move the hearts of those who would go and be part of the rebuilding work in Judah (consider the challenges that lay ahead of them)? Why do you think that their neighbours are so eager to assist them with all kinds of things? In v7-11 we see detail of items the King sent back: in light of this how do you understand 2 Kings 24:13?

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LISTING THE EXILES (2:1-70): Why were the returning exiles referred to as *people of the province* (v1)? This list is also contained in Nehemiah 7: amidst the enormous detail of the near 50,000 people (the first wave), what is particularly striking, surprising and/or encouraging about what is included here? Why do you think that others chose not to return to Judah either in the first wave or not at all?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: To what extent was King Cyrus a likely or unlikely hero for the people of Israel? How does God work through him? Cyrus is also mentioned in Daniel 1:21, 6:28 & 10:1. How do you respond to suggestions that he might have played a role in sharing the prophecies with the King?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God for His faithfulness to His people in bringing them back from exile after 70 years. Thank God for the willingness of these people to go when God moved their hearts. Ask God to similarly move you to follow His call on your lives and to play your part in His purposes.

MEMORY VERSE: EZRA 1:3

STUDY 2 – EZRA 3-4 – CHALLENGES OF REBUILDING

INTRODUCTION: During the 7th month (when the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets, and the Feast of Tabernacles were celebrated), the returning Israelites rebuilt the altar to the LORD and made sacrifices to Him. Work on the temple soon began but it wasn't long before they faced opposition.

SETTING THE SCENE: The temple (formerly the tabernacle) had been the focal point for the relationship God's people had with their God: what specific reasons can you think for why it was so important for this to be the first phase of rebuilding? What might be an equivalent for us today?

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CORPORATE WORSHIP (3:1-6): Why do you think that the altar is top of the priority list for the rebuild? How was its location (which was set on its original foundation) so important? In what ways might this relatively fast phase have been an encouragement to the people (esp. v4-5)?

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STARTING BUILDING (3:7-11): Building work soon begins (compare v1 with v8) on the back of various preparations (v7). What do you notice about the roles of the people, the leaders and those appointed to supervise (v8-9)? Why was the completion of the foundation an opportunity to praise God (v10)? What does their worship reveal about their relationship with God at this point (v11)?

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JOY AND SORROW (3:12-13): To what extent can you understand the mixed response to the foundations of this new temple? Why were those who had seen the former temple so sad? How do the prophets warn against despising this new temple (Haggai 2:1-9, Zechariah 4:8-10)? When might we also be in danger of clinging to the past rather than embracing the new?

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POLITICAL ALLEGIANCE (4:1-3): During the exile Judah was not completely empty and Samaria had been resettled by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:24-33). Why are these early *Samaritans* referred to here as enemies (see esp. v2b) and how do you understand Zerubbabel's refusal of their offer of help? To what extent was this refusal (turning down help they desperately needed) an act of faith?

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FACING OPPOSITION (4:4-16): These verses describe opposition to the rebuilding during the reigns of Cyrus (v4-5), Xerxes (v6) and Artaxexes (v7-16): how would you distinguish the various strategies employed against the rebuilding? How much of the content of their letter (v11-16) was truth or lies? What do you think made them so determined to see their efforts fail?

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WORK GRINDS TO A HALT (4:17-24): What did the King find upon investigation into the claims of these so-called servants in Trans-Euphrates? What do you think it was that convinced the King to bring work forcefully to a standstill? What is encouraging about v24 suggesting this was a delay not defeat?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: The rebuilding project was in one sense very practical work: what however was the spiritual aspect of this endeavour? What is your experience of how God's work (seeing the Kingdom of God advance) attracts opposition from those who oppose it?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God for the early progress made by God's people and for the impact this had on the relationship with God. Ask Him that you too would enjoy such blessing as you help build His Kingdom today. Pray that God would protect you amidst the inevitable opposition we will face.

MEMORY VERSE: EZRA 3:11

STUDY 3 – EZRA 5-6 – BRINGING WORK TO COMPLETION

INTRODUCTION: At the end of chapter 4, work had ground to a halt for some 15 years. God now moves the prophets to call God's people back to the task of rebuilding the temple. As ever the work of God suffers immediate opposition, but at the end of chapter 6, we find that the work is finally complete.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you were involved in a practical project which ended up getting delayed: what were the issues that brought work to a halt and what did it take to get things back on track? What was your response when the work was finally completed?

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GOD'S WORD (5:1-2): To restart the building work God sent Haggai & Zechariah to prophecy to God's people: what is your understanding of Old Testament prophecy? What was the thrust of these prophecies and why were they effective (Haggai 1:2-10 & Zechariah 1:1-6)? What role (if any) do you think that prophecy plays within the Body of Christ today (see 1 Cor 12:7-11 & 1 Thess 5:20)?

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GOD'S PROTECTION (5:3-5): What do you think motivated Tattenai & Shethar-Bozenaj to investigate what was happening in Jerusalem? In what ways was this different to the previous opposition they had endured in chapter 4? What were the factors that allowed them to keep on building? When have you experienced an immediate challenge having received the Word of God?

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LETTER TO THE GOVERNOR (5:6-17): What are your first impressions of the report which they sent to King Darius (a 'copy', v6)? How much of the content of his report was true? Which aspects were of particular concern? Who is Sheshbazzar (suggestions include Zerubbabel or the Persian Governor)? What is the upshot of what the report was asking of the King (v17)?

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THE KINGS RESPONSE (6:1-12): How does the gist of what was written on the scroll they found (v3-5), compare to the edict given by King Cyrus in 1:2-4? In what ways did the investigation actually serve to further the rebuilding work, rather than thwart it (v6-10a)?

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To what extent do you think the King was motivated by a desire for the prayers of God's people (v10b)? Why do you think that he ordered such a strong punishment for any who defied his edict?

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COMPLETING THE TEMPLE (6:13-18): It took 4 years to complete the rebuilding work from the point when work resumed: what are the factors mentioned in these verses about what drove the work to the point of completion (v13-15)? What do you imagine it would have been like to have been part of the celebration that accompanied the dedication of the temple (v16-18)?

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CELEBRATING THE PASSOVER (6:19-22): Why did celebrating the first Passover in the new temple bring such joy to the people (v22a)? Why is it significant that it was not merely the returning exiles who ate the Passover (v21)? When has seeing God move in the people around you brought you great joy?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What do you think that God's people learned from all they experienced in the work of rebuilding the temple? What about you own experiences: what has God taught you through the ups and downs of being involved in building His Kingdom?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that He continues to work behind the scenes to bring about His purposes and build His Kingdom. Ask God to help you to help you as you play your part and fill you with joy as you see God working out His purposes.

MEMORY VERSE: EZRA 6:22

STUDY 4 – EZRA 7-8 – GOD’S HAND WAS UPON THEM

INTRODUCTION: Almost 60 years have passed since the events of Ezra 6 and now Artaxerxes is the King of Persia. These chapters focus on the latest cohort returning from exile to Jerusalem. Specifically, this group included Ezra himself who was a skilled teacher/scribe.

SETTING THE SCENE: Babylon to Jerusalem was 500miles as the crow flies but it’s likely that they would have had to travel up to 900miles via the Euphrates River: what do you imagine that such a journey (which v8 says took 4 months) would have involved (e.g., challenges, disappointments etc)?

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INTRODUCING EZRA (7:1-10): What does Ezra’s lineage (v1-5, see reference to Seraiah in 2 Kings 25:18) tell us about the importance of this man? What most impresses you about the way that Ezra is described here (esp. v6 & 11)? Why is the repeated phrase “God’s hand was on him” (v6b & v9b) so significant? How had he prepared himself for all that God had in store for him (v10)?

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THE LETTER: MANDATE & PROVISION (7:11-22): What was the mandate that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra as he sent him to Jerusalem (esp. v13-14)? Ezra was also to carry with him officially sanctioned funds (nb: 100 talents amounted to 3¾ tons of silver): what were the parameters that the King gave him for the use of these finances?

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THE LETTER: MOTIVE & ENFORCEMENT (7:23-26): What does v23 reveal about the Kings motive in all that he instructed here? How would the work at the temple be furthered by the tax-exempt status for temple workers (v24) and Ezra’s authority to administer justice, teach and invoke punishment?

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PRAISING GOD (7:27-28): What reasons does Ezra give for why he wants to praise the LORD in these verses? What impresses you about his absolute trust in the Sovereignty of God and what ways have you seen and experienced the hand of God at work in and through your own lives?

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THOSE WHO RETURNED (8:1-20): 1,496 men (perhaps a total of 6-7,000 including women and children) returned to Jerusalem: what most impresses you about the detail given here and why was the lack of any Levites such an issue for Ezra (v15)? What steps did Ezra take to tackle this (v16-20)?

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TRAVELLING TO JERUSALEM (8:21-23): To what extent would you say (or not say) that Ezra was foolhardy in not asking for the King's protection on the journey (v22)? Why? Given that he didn't ask for it, what can we learn from the steps he took (v21 & v23) to mitigate against this very real threat?

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TRANSIT OF THE VALUABLES (8:24-34): For what reasons did Ezra set apart 12 priests to carry the staggering value of silver, gold and articles to Jerusalem? What specific instructions did he give to the priests both in transit and upon arrival in Jerusalem (think in terms of responsibility & accountability)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER (v35-36): What do we learn from these verses about the outcome of Ezra's mission in coming to Jerusalem? What things have stood out to you about how Ezra, this man of faith and integrity, had trusted God and sought to see him glorified in all that he did in these chapters?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God for the way that His hand was so clearly at work to see His purposes worked out. Ask God to show you His hand upon all your life and ask Him to help you to respond with faith, integrity and prayerfulness as you seek to get on board with all that He is doing.

MEMORY VERSE: EZRA 7:10

STUDY 5 – EZRA 9-10 – CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION: Following the journey back to Israel, Ezra is confronted with the state of the nation which leads him and the people of God into a process of confession and repentance. The book finishes with the people's determination to put things right before their God.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you were righteously shocked, astonished and/or appalled at something that was exposed in your sphere of influence: what made it so difficult to hear and what was good/not so good about how you responded to it?

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STATE OF THE NATION (9:1-4): What were the issues exposed to Ezra by the leaders of the people of Israel (v1-2)? Why were they such a big deal (Exodus 34:11-16, Deut 7:1-4)? To what extent does this help you understand Ezra's strong reaction (appalled/astonished) about the state of Israel (v3)?

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What are the characteristics of those who *tremble at the word of the God of Israel* (v4)? What modern day equivalent might draw out a similar reaction on our part either individually (v3) or corporately (v4)?

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TURNING TO PRAYER (9:5-6): What do you make of the way that Ezra transitions from his mourning to a time of prayer with this sense of shame and disgrace before God? What could we learn from how Ezra kneels before God with his hands spread out but without lifting up his face (v6)?

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REMEMBERING GOD'S KINDNESS (9:7-9): In what ways does Ezra recognise the wrath of God upon them because of their sin (v7)? How does he acknowledge the grace of God (giving them what they didn't deserve) poured out on them (v8-9)? Why does he use this phrase *for a brief moment* (v8)?

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THE MERCY OF GOD (9:10-15): Why do you think that Ezra offers no excuses or explanations for his people's disobedience? How does Ezra see the mercy (not giving them what they deserve) of God (v13-14)? What impresses you about God faithfulness to His promises to preserve a remnant for His people (see 2 Chronicles 30:6 & Isaiah 10:20-22)? How does Ezra appeal to God's mercy in v15?

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FORSAKING THEIR SIN (10:1-8): What made Shekariah conclude that in spite of their sin *there was still hope for Israel* (v1-2)? How hard would it be for them to send away their foreign women and children as he instructed (v3-4)? To what extent do you think this was (or wasn't) what God required? Ezra clearly agreed: what steps did he take to turn Shekeniah's counsel into action?

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A SPIRIT OF REPENTANCE (10:9-44): What shocks or surprises you about the way that God's people responded to Ezra's call to repentance (v9-15)? Why do you think the leaders felt it necessary to investigate every case over a period of three months (v16-17)? How do you respond to the inclusion of this list of people who had been guilty of intermarriage (v18-44)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What lessons do these chapters teach us about how to come before God in prayer, confession and repentance? What might be some of examples of occasions when we might need to do this either individually or corporately?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Give thanks for the truths of 1 John 1:9: namely that God is faithful and just to forgive those who confess their sin and purify them from all unrighteousness. Share and pray through areas of our Christian culture where we too fail to honour Gods commands to us.

MEMORY VERSE: EZRA 10:11

STUDY 6 – NEHEMIAH 1-2 – GETTING ON BOARD WITH WHAT GOD IS DOING

INTRODUCTION: Nehemiah is distressed by the distress the exiles faced back in Judah and esp. the state of the city walls. This motivates him to lament and pray to God before petitioning the King to allow him to return and rebuild the wall. The King responded favourably because God’s hand was upon Him.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you have returned to a special place or visited a person that you love, and you were disappointed that things were not as they once were. How did such an experience make you feel? What steps were you motivated to take (or not take) and why?

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HANANI’S REPORT (1:1-3): What do we learn in these verses about Nehemiah (also v11c) and why he takes such interest with the state of Judah? What is a *remnant* and why were they in such *trouble* and *disgrace*? Why was the state of the walls and gates such a big deal (see also Psalm 137:5-6)?

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RESPONDING TO GOD (1:4): Given the nature of the report, how do you square Nehemiah’s initial reaction in v4? To what extent do you agree that God often works out His plans by first working in our hearts? When might this have been the case in your own lives?

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HOW TO PRAY (1:5-11): What different elements do you see in Nehemiah’s prayer? What most impresses you about the way that he approached God and sought to ask God to move in the challenges they were facing in Judah? How does His understanding of God (esp. His character and promises) shape the way that He came to God? How does this prayer compare to your own prayers?

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MOVED TO ACTION (1:11-2:3): Nehemiah’s prayer makes clear that he already had in mind to act: what was his plan and why does he wait 4 months before enacting it? What level of risk was Nehemiah taking, in being *sad* in the presence of the King? How do we see his dependence on God in this?

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WHAT IS IT YOU WANT (2:4-8): What do you make of Nehemiah's instinctive reaction to pray in response to the Kings question (v4)? How would you describe the manner in which he makes his request? Is he pushing his luck in asking for letters to ensure safe conduct and building materials?

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VISITING JERUSALEM (2:11-18): Why does Nehemiah come to Jerusalem in secret without telling anyone what God had put on his heart (v11-16)? How does this careful investigation then enable him to own the problem and call the people to participate in its solution? What impresses you about how Nehemiah shows them that it was God who was opening this door of opportunity?

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GROWING OPPOSITION (2:9-10, 19-20): Why were Tobiah (meaning *Yahweh is good*) and Sanballat (possibly the governor of Samaria) so disturbed by what was happening (v10)? What was their initial plan to oppose the work and how did Nehemiah combat these tactics?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What lessons would you draw out from the example of Nehemiah and how he responds to all that is going on around him? How can we apply these lessons to situations in our own lives as we seek to play our part in rebuilding and restoring all that is around us?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that He is always deeply interested in all that is going on in our lives. Ask God to make us people who are instructively prayerful and willing to follow the Lord's leading in seeking to work out God's purposes in the lives of those around us.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 1:4

STUDY 7 – NEHEMIAH 3-4 – STANDING TOGETHER

INTRODUCTION: The work of rebuilding began in 2:18 and here in chapter 3 we see God’s people beginning to pull together to get the job done. However, once again they experience opposition and chapter 4 details a series of escalating challenges that threaten to derail the rebuilding work!

SETTING THE SCENE: God confused the languages of the early inhabitants of the earth because as they worked together God saw that *“nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them”* (Genesis 11:6). Why is teamwork so powerful and what have been your experiences of good/bad teamwork?

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TEAMWORK (3:1-32): Over fifty people are mentioned by name in this chapter: which people particularly stand out and why? What do you notice about the breadth of these backgrounds and professions these people had (e.g., v1, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 20, 22, 29, 31 & 32)? What do you think is the significance of Eliashib (and the other priests) being mentioned first?

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THE MEN OF TEKOA (v5 & 27): How do you react to the Tekoan nobles’ refusal to join in with the work? What might have motivated such behaviour? Despite this the men of Tekoa are mentioned again in v27: how did their example (or indeed that of Baruch in v27) put their nobles to shame?

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BODY OF CHRIST: What applications are there for us from the way that the entire community went about playing their part to rebuild the wall? Any breach in the wall would have been a huge problem: how similarly might us not using our gifts in the body of Christ also leave important gaps?

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RIDICULE (4:1-6): Why were Sanballat & Tobiah so agitated by the continuing work? How would you describe their tactics and what impact were their words designed to have? Nehemiah’s response is to pray: what do you make of his strong words in v4-5? Why did the people work with *all their hearts* (v6)?

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THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE (4:7-10): In what ways do Sanballat, Tobiah (and their growing group of associates) seek to escalate their opposition to the rebuilding work? What response did these escalating threats evoke from God's people both positively (v9) and negatively (v10)? How do you see the connection between prayer (depending on God) and action (being willing to step out)?

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FRUSTRATING THEIR PLOT (4:11-15): How did Nehemiah seek to counter their enemies plot to come amongst them and kill them (v11-12)? Again, their response is a mix of action (stationing guards) and dependence on God: how would you summarise Nehemiah's call to the people to remember the Lord (v14)? In what sense was it God who had frustrated their enemies plans (v15)?

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PREPARING THEIR DEFENSE (4:16-23): In what ways did the plot permanently change their working practices? Why were the trumpet-calls such an important introduction as a means of communication as they sought to work together? Why were they so convinced that God work fight for them?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How would you summarise the key lessons from these chapters about working together, depending on God, and stepping out in faith? How might these lessons challenge and encourage you as you seek to labour with God amidst the ongoing spiritual battle?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Praise God for the huge potential as we work together as part of the Body of Christ. Ask God to help each of us when we face spiritual opposition to all that God is doing in us and through us. Pray that God would grow our dependence on Him whilst also stepping out in faith.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 4:14

STUDY 8 – NEHEMIAH 5-6 – OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION: These chapters detail some of the challenges faced by Judean remnant. First in chapter 5, a challenge arises from within regarding what some people were having to do to put food on their tables. Then secondly, they face further opposition (and threat to their lives) from their enemies.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you have been involved in some ministry project or endeavour and you have faced challenges. How would you describe the challenges and what most surprised you about them? To what extent should we expect such challenges as we labour with God?

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STRUGGLING TO GET BY (5:1-5): How would you contrast the differing situations of the people described in these verses (see v2, v3 & v4-5)? In what ways did the work on the wall contribute to this poverty and how did it create this *great outcry* amongst God's people? What do you think motivated some in Judah to act in this way against their fellow Jews?

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NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE (5:6-11): All of this makes Nehemiah very angry (v6): what steps does he take to resolve the crisis that probably brought work on the wall to a halt (the only mention is in v16)? Why was it such a big deal that the nobles and officials were charging interest (Exodus 22:25)?

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PUTTING THINGS RIGHT (5:12-19): What impresses you about the response of the nobles and officials in v12-13? How did Nehemiah ensure accountability in following through on their commitment? How does Nehemiah's example (v14-18) contrast with that of the nobles and officials? To what extent can we (or should we) identify with Nehemiah's request for God to remember him with favour (v19)?

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In Chapter 6:1-14 Judah's enemies use three strategies to derail the rebuilding work on the city walls:

PLOT #1: FRIENDSHIP (6:1-4): What causes Nehemiah to be so suspicious of his enemies' repeated request for a meeting away from Judah? What impresses you about how he responds to them? What can we learn from Nehemiah's refusal to be distracted from the work God had given to him?

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PLOT #2: SLANDER (6:5-9): What most shocks you from the second strategy employed here by Judah's enemies? Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes, how might you have responded to this fictitious account? What can we learn from Nehemiah's calmness, insight, and prayerfulness as he responds?

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PLOT #3: RELIGION (6:10-14): What enabled Nehemiah to see through Shemaiah's false prophecy as he offered him a seemingly easy way out of his perilous position? How do these challenges echo the invitations offered to Jesus (see Matthew 4:1-11, 27:40 & 1 Peter 2:23)?

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COMPLETING THE WALL (6:15-16): The walls had been ruins for 100 years but the rebuilding had been completed in just 52 days. After all this time (during which nothing happened), what would you say were the necessary ingredients required to make this happen? What do you think caused the surrounding nations to realise that this had been completed with the help of their God (v16)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER (6:17-19): Why was their accomplishment so extraordinary in light of the apparent alliances with Tobiah mentioned in these verses? What can we learn from Nehemiah's willingness to stick to his guns while leaving Tobiah (v14), and those allied with him to God?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: As you commit yourself to devoting yourselves to the work of the LORD (1 Cor 15:58), ask God to give you insight into all that would seek to hinder that work. Ask God to give you clarify of heart and vision for all that God is calling you to give your lives to.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 6:16

STUDY 9 – NEHEMIAH 7-8 – SPIRITUAL RESTORATION

INTRODUCTION: With the rebuilding of the walls now complete, Nehemiah turns his attention to the state of the city itself (with few people and many houses still in ruins) and the state of their hearts (the public reading of God's law). This leads to spiritual revival as God's people come back to their God.

SETTING THE SCENE: What is your understanding (or experience) of periods of spiritual restoration or revival? What would tend to be the trigger/catalyst, the marks of the Holy Spirit's hand in, and the resulting outcomes from such an experience?

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NEW RESPONSIBILITIES (7:1-3): Why do you think Nehemiah delegates leadership of Jerusalem? What specifically makes Hanani (his brother) and Hananiah well suited to the job (see also Nehemiah 1:2)? What steps does Nehemiah take in these verses to safeguard the future of Jerusalem?

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STATE OF THE CITY (7:4-5): With the walls now restored what does Nehemiah observe about the state of the city? In what ways does this fuel his desire to gather and register the people? How do you understand the phrase *God put it into my heart (v5)*? What's been your experience of God doing this?

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THE RETURNEE EXILES (7:6-73a): Why is it so significant that this detailed list of those who had returned from exile is mentioned again in this book (previously included in Ezra 2)? What fresh observations do you have of this list given all that we have seen in Nehemiah? In what ways does the list help remind us that the rebuilding of the walls was for the benefit of the people not an end in itself?

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EXILES ASSEMBLE (7:73b-8:3): This is the first a number of references to Ezra in Nehemiah (also chapter 12): what most impresses you about the desire to gather as one people and have Ezra read

them the law (probably first 5 books of the Old Testament)? Why do you think that this assembled gathering (of all who could understand) are so attentive to the reading of the law (v3)?

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RECEIVING THE LAW (8:4-8): What do you notice about the detail given here about how the book of the law was read to the people (e.g., the platform, Ezra's supporters, the role of the Levites in helping people to understand)? What can we learn here about how to understand and teach the Bible?

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EXPERIENCING REVIVAL (8:9-13): Why do Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites instruct the Jews not to weep, mourn or grieve (which are often natural reactions to the Word of God) but instead to celebrate joyfully? In what ways have you experienced that the joy of the LORD is our strength (v10)?

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THE ART OF CELEBRATION (8:14-18): God gave the Feast of Tabernacles to help His people remember His blessing and provision for them during the Exodus (Leviticus 23:33-43): why is it so significant that they are able to celebrate it again after so long (see v17b)? How does their desire to celebrate and continue reading the law help us appreciate the work that the Spirit was doing in them?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: When you read about the way that God's people returned both to Him and to His Word, in what ways do you feel challenged to do likewise? What practical steps can you take to begin a process of restoration in your own relationship with God?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that he never gives up on us but works tirelessly to draw us back to Himself. Ask God to light a fire in your hearts to eagerly study His word and respond in obedience.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 8:10

STUDY 10 – NEHEMIAH 9-10 – CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION: These chapters are set amidst a big assembly of all the people. In chapter 9 we read how they gathered together wearing sackcloth to fast, pray and confess their sins together. Then in chapter 10 they made a binding agreement together to change their ways live in obedience to God.

SETTING THE SCENE: How would you define true confession and repentance? Think of an example from your own life (or from the life of others) where you have messed up big time and had to come back in confession and repentance. What were the factors that resulted in such a turnaround?

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COMING TOGETHER (9:1-6): The mood of celebration soon shifts to humility as God's people gather as one before their God: what do their actions in these verses (e.g., fasting, choice of clothing, separation from foreigners) tell us about their state of mind (v1-5a)? What reasons do the Levites give as to why they should praise God (v5b-6)?

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PRAISING GOD'S GOODNESS (9:7-15): In what ways is God's goodness described in response to their faithfulness (v8), suffering (v9) and hunger/thirst (v15)? How have you experienced God's goodness and faithfulness to His promises in your own life?

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THEIR SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES (9:16-21): God's people responded to God's goodness sinfully: to what extent can you identify with some of the ways this is described here (v16-17a)? How do these verses describe the way that God's character motivated His gracious response to their sin (e.g., 17b *& 19a)? In what ways have you similarly experienced God's grace in your own lives?

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THE CYCLE OF SIN (9:22-31): How do these verses describe the cyclic nature of their up-and-down relationship with God and the ways that He subsequently responded to them? What do you identify as the trigger points in these verses for their repeated drifting away from and drawing back to God?

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PLEADING FOR CHANGE (9:32-37): Why was the spirit of confession seen in these verses so important for God's people at this time? Despite experiencing the consequences of their own sinfulness, in what ways are these verses a plea for God to transform their current situation?

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SIGNING THE AGREEMENT (9:38-10:39): What impresses you about the people's determination to sign up to a binding agreement (v38) between them and God? What specific terms were included in this agreement regarding their relationships (v30), trade (v31) and supporting God's work (v32-39)? Why were such commitments so important given the lessons we have seen from their history?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How would you describe the blessings of engaging in confession and repentance over our sin? What would you say are the dangers of refusing to do so? In what ways can we learn from the way that God's people draw near to God throughout these chapters?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that He is gracious, compassionate, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love. Spend some time together in corporate praise and confession. Ask God to help you to respond to Him in repentance and whole-hearted obedience.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 9:31

STUDY 11 – NEHEMIAH 11-12 – RESETTLEMENT AND DEDICATION

INTRODUCTION: We saw in 7:4-5 that Jerusalem was spacious and without too many inhabitants. To meet this need, we find the leaders and 1/10th of the people moving to Jerusalem in chapter 11:1-12:26. Then in chapter 12:27-47 the wall of Jerusalem is dedicated to the Lord.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you were part of a ceremony of dedication (e.g., child, new building/enterprise etc): what were the key elements of the dedications and why was it important? As God's people prepare to dedicate the wall what initial thoughts do you have about its significance?

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MAKING JERUSALEM A HOME (11:1-2): Why was it so important for the leaders of God's people to settle within Jerusalem? 10% of the people move to Jerusalem: how do you understand the apparent discrepancy between a process of casting lots and volunteering? Why were such people commended? How would you feel if you were asked to resettle elsewhere to further God's purposes?

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THOSE WHO RESETTLED (11:3-12:26): What stands out to you from this comprehensive list of the provincial leaders to resettle in Jerusalem (consider the numbers, names, descriptions)? Bearing in mind 2 Tim 3:16, what would you say is the importance of such a list being included in Scripture?

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THE LEVITES (12:27-30): These verses say that the Levites were sought out and brought to Jerusalem: what roles had the Levites traditionally played in the spiritual life of God's people (see also v8 & 24)? Why was it so important for the Levites to first purify themselves before proceeding to purify the people, the gates and the wall (see also Psalm 24:3-4)?

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TWO CHOIRS (12:31-43): What specific details stand out to you from these verse about the two choirs tasked with leading Jerusalem in joyful praise? What can we imply from these verses about how God's people were feeling at this point? How might this loud rejoicing have been received elsewhere (v43)?

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SERVICE OF THE LORD (12:44-47): How would you distinguish between *contributions*, *firstfruits* and *tithes* (v44)? What do you think that God asks of us in this respect today? What do these verses teach us about the way that God provides for those who served Him as priests, Levites, musicians & gatekeepers? What would be equivalent roles/functions today?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What has this chapter taught you about how to respond to the goodness and provision of God in our lives? To what extent do you think that we are good at the art of celebration in our lives, churches and Christian communities?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God for His keen interest in all the details of our lives. Praise and celebrate God's goodness in each of your lives. Thank God specifically for those He calls into service full time as Pastors, teachers, apostles, evangelists & prophets (Ephesians 4:11-13).

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 12:27

STUDY 12 – NEHEMIAH 13 – IMPLEMENTING REFORM

INTRODUCTION: This final chapter begins with the challenging obedience of God’s people to what they found written about the Ammonites and Moabites. Seemingly however, Nehemiah had returned to Persia and could have been gone for as much as 10-12 years. Upon his return, he enacts some urgent reforms to bring God’s people back to the promises they had made in 10:30-39.

SETTING THE SCENE: Give examples of when you (or others) have made promises and despite initial progress, have reverted back to where you started out. Why are we so prone to giving up and failing to carry things through over the long-term?

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TRUE OBEDIENCE (v1-3): While reading the book of Moses, God’s people read Deut 23:3-4: what was the big deal about the Ammonites and Moabites? In what ways did God turn their curse into a blessing (Numbers 22-24)? What is your reaction to the people’s exclusion of all from *foreign descent*? What has been your experience of *obedience to God*, flowing out of your *worship of God*?

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REFORMING THE TEMPLE (v4-9): What impresses you more: Nehemiah’s willingness to return to his duties for the King of Persia or his boldness in asking to return after *some time* had passed? How do you understand his strong reaction against Eliashib’s associations with Tobiah and the provision of storage in the temple (see also 2:10)? In this, how was Nehemiah like Jesus (see Matthew 21:12-17)?

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REFORMING THEIR GIVING (v10-14): What were the responsibilities of the people towards the Levites (remember their promises in 10:32-39)? What were the implications of their failure in this respect? How does Nehemiah go about ensuring that the house of God was no longer neglected? In what ways might we apply this today?

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REFORMING THE SABBATH (v15-22a): How were the people neglecting God's instructions (and their own promises in 10:31) regarding the Sabbath (note the words *desecrating* and *wicked thing*)? What strategies does Nehemiah employ to ensure that the people keep the Sabbath? If you have time discuss what role does the Sabbath day have for us today (see Exodus 20:8-11, Colossians 2:16-17)?

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REFORMING RELATIONSHIPS (v23-31a): To what extent do you agree that Nehemiah's reaction here implies that relational disobedience is the most dangerous of all the people's sins (see 10:30)? Do you think Nehemiah overreacts with his strong actions? How does Nehemiah bring reform in this respect: esp. in relation to the Priest's son (v28) and his prayer that God would remember them (v29)?

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REMEMBER ME (v14, 22b & 31b): Three times in this chapter Nehemiah asks God to remember him: how do you understand what he is asking God to do in these verses? Considering the people's failure both to obey God, and keep their own promises (10:30-39), how does Romans 8:3 help us understand why this is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament anticipating the arrival of Jesus?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How do you think that the disappointments of the book of Nehemiah (esp. in this chapter) point to the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus? In what ways was Nehemiah a *type of Christ* (compare also 1:4, 2:18, Psalm 2:1-3, 4:1-3,7, 6:2, 6, 15 with the life of Jesus)?

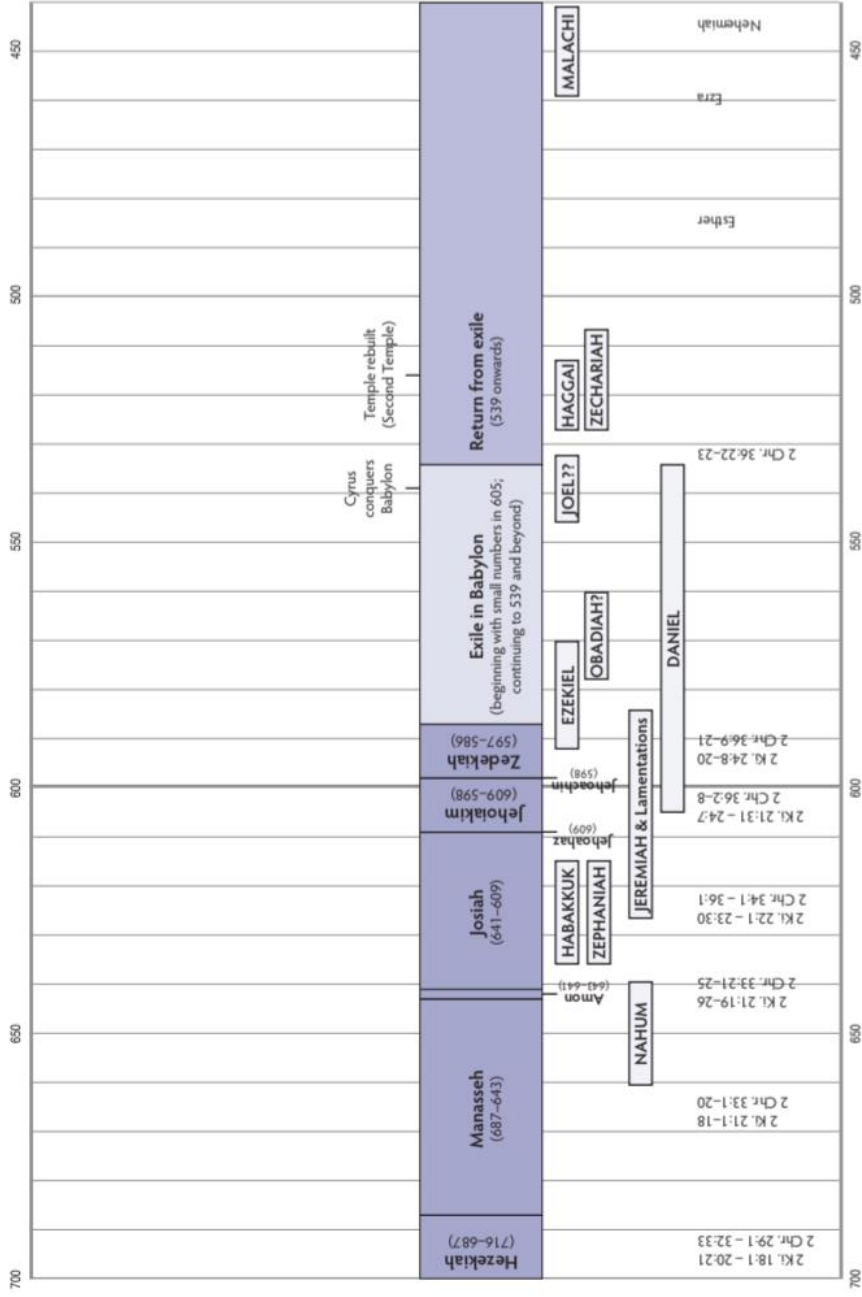
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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that under the New Covenant the Holy Spirit moves us to follow His decrees (Ezekiel 36:24-27). Ask God to help us keep our promises of obedience to Him. Ask Him to help us to imitate Nehemiah's example in giving himself wholeheartedly to God's work.

MEMORY VERSE: NEHEMIAH 13:14

Old Testament History: Babylonian Exile to Malachi



MEMORY VERSES

STUDY 1 – EZRA 1-2 – GOD’S INITIATIVE

“Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.” **Ezra 1:3**

STUDY 2 – EZRA 3-4 – CHALLENGES OF REBUILDING

“With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: ‘He is good; his love towards Israel endures for ever.’ And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.” **Ezra 3:11**

STUDY 3 – EZRA 5-6 – BRINGING WORK TO COMPLETION

“For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.” **Ezra 6:22**

STUDY 4 – EZRA 7-8 – GOD’S HAND WAS UPON THEM

“For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” **Ezra 7:10**

STUDY 5 – EZRA 9-10 – CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

“Now honour the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.” **Ezra 10:11**

STUDY 6 – NEHEMIAH 1-2 – GETTING ON BOARD WITH WHAT GOD IS DOING

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” **Nehemiah 1:4**

STUDY 7 – NEHEMIAH 3-4 – STANDING TOGETHER

“After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.’” **Nehemiah 4:14**

STUDY 8 – NEHEMIAH 5-6 – OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.” **Nehemiah 6:16**

STUDY 9 – NEHEMIAH 7-8 – SPIRITUAL RESTORATION

“Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength’.” **Nehemiah 8:10**

STUDY 10 – NEHEMIAH 9-10 – CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

“But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.” **Nehemiah 9:31**

STUDY 11 – NEHEMIAH 11-12 – RESETTLEMENT AND DEDICATION

“At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.” **Nehemiah 12:27**

STUDY 12 – NEHEMIAH 13 – IMPLEMENTING REFORM

“Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.” **Nehemiah 13:14**