

# Overlooked: Ezra-Nehemiah

## *Not the Leadership Lessons You Expect*

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The biblical figures of Ezra and Nehemiah are not the most popular or well-known. They're not connected to any of the most memorable stories, like the flood or the Exodus from Egypt. No signs or wonders occur during their days. Neither of them accomplishes mighty feats or brings about miraculous acts of deliverance. Ezra is a Bible nerd who gets other people to take the Bible seriously. Nehemiah is essentially a project manager for the rebuilding of the ancient walls of Jerusalem. I mean, that's cool and all, but it doesn't seem as important or as exciting as the stories about Moses or Elijah. It's totally understandable why no one thinks of Ezra or Nehemiah when they think of significant characters of the Bible.

## These Are Not Leadership Guides

But this is a huge mistake. That is, if you want to understand the [biblical storyline](#) on its own terms.

Much of the modern Christian tradition hasn't really known what to do with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Because of the deeply held assumption that the Bible is primarily moral instruction literature (= a divine rule book), the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah are usually turned into examples for how to lead a revival (Ezra), or how to create momentum for your next church building project (Nehemiah).

I'm not joking. Here's a list of book title results from searching "Ezra" and "Nehemiah" on Amazon.com:

*Nehemiah: Becoming a Godly Leader; Revive Us Again: A Study of Ezra and Nehemiah; Rebuild the Walls: Lessons in Leadership from Nehemiah; Ezra: A Biblical Model for Restoration; The Nehemiah Factor: 16 Vital Keys to Living Like a Missional Leader; Nehemiah: Becoming a Disciplined Leader; Overcoming Fear and Discouragement with Ezra and Nehemiah; Leadership for Greatness: Leadership Lessons from the Book of Nehemiah*

Now I have lots of sympathy for how this trend has taken place. We really want the Bible to speak a relevant and personal message to us and to our day. And that is indeed what the Bible is for. But the way the Bible goes about doing that is not at all similar to the method of modern self-help literature, even Christian versions. Biblical literature doesn't communicate by offering simple answers and moral examples. Rather, the characters that populate the biblical stories are deeply flawed, often ambiguous, and a mixed-bag of success and failure.

Kind of like you and me.

The stories of Ezra and Nehemiah tell a realistic story of religious people who are zealous to help others see the world and God in a new way. They are full of passion and love for God, and do everything in their power to lead the Israelites into a new era of devotion to their God ... and it doesn't work. The story ends with Nehemiah in angry tears, beating the Israelites for violating the covenant commands of the Torah (see Nehemiah ch. 13). Does that sound like a pattern of inspirational leadership that you should follow?

It doesn't, and that's because these books aren't offering us a list of tips to successful leadership. That's actually the opposite of their message. In reality, they offer a sobering story of leaders who cannot bring

about the full realization of their hopes and dreams, even when they tried and prayed their hardest. This theme fulfills a crucial role in the larger biblical storyline, but we'll come back to that in a few minutes.

## Framework

Let's first understand the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of their literary design. They are two separate books in modern English Bibles, but that division is not original (it took place later in the history of printed Bibles). These stories are actually one unified whole and were designed to be read as one big story told in three parallel movements with two conclusions, one positive and one negative.

**Three Parallel Movements:** Ezra 1-6: Zerubbabel and Joshua lead the first wave of exiles back from Babylon (with mixed results); Ezra 7-10: Ezra attempts a spiritual revival among the returned exiles (again, with mixed results); Nehemiah 1-7: Nehemiah leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (with mixed results)

**Two Concluding Movements:** Nehemiah 8-10: Ezra and Nehemiah stage a revival in Jerusalem...; Nehemiah 11-13: ... which basically fails and ends with Nehemiah's anger and disappointment

The first three movements each begin with lots of hope and possibility. Each starts with a Persian king sponsoring an Israelite leader to lead a wave of exiles back to the ruins of Jerusalem to rebuild their lives (Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in Ezra 1-2; Ezra in Ezra ch. 7; Nehemiah in Nehemiah ch. 1). In each case the group returns and makes some attempt at restoration, whether it's rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3-6), making a commitment to the Torah (Ezra 9-10), or rebuilding the city walls (Nehemiah 2-7). And in each case, they face hostility from without (Ezra 4 and Nehemiah 2-7). After all three of these cycles, the reader should start to clue in and ask: "Why do these great beginnings keep concluding with mixed results?"

Welcome to the message of Ezra-Nehemiah! After reading through Genesis to Kings, you know why the Israelites ended up in Babylon in the first place. According to Israel's prophets, it was the result of centuries of abandoning Yahweh for other gods, and for allowing covenant violation and social injustice. Then you read the prophets, who said that exile was indeed a just consequence, but not the end of the story. God was going to fulfill his great promise to Abraham to bring divine blessing to all of the rebellious nations, which he would do through Abraham's family, despite their failure and exile. God was going to bring a remnant back to Jerusalem and make them the epicenter of the new kingdom of God that brings peace to all of the nations (remember Isaiah 2).

In other words, our hopes are really high as we turn to Ezra ch. 1 of God's kingdom, when forgiven Israel will become the people of the new covenant (remember Jeremiah), whose hearts are fully devoted to loving God and their neighbors. We should be brimming with expectation as we read Ezra-Nehemiah. But at every turn of the story, things don't work out the way you thought they should.

When the new temple is rebuilt, many people are thrilled. Yet, we're told that the elders who saw the final days of Solomon's temple wept (Ezra 3:12-13). There was a great gap between their expectation and the reality of what took place.

When Ezra returns to lead a revival, he finds out that many of the leaders of the returned exiles have been compromised by inappropriate marriages to non-Israelites (Ezra 9-10).

When Nehemiah leads a movement to rebuild the walls, he discovers that the returned exiles have perpetuated unjust lending practices leading to the enslavement of their fellow Israelites (Nehemiah 5).

What's going on here?

These three movements are followed by the high point of the book. In Nehemiah 8-10 the walls of Jerusalem are dedicated with great fanfare. There are choirs, a marching band, the whole bit!

They rally Israelites from all ages to hear the Scriptures read aloud. It's a seven day Bible marathon, and the people are so moved that they commit themselves to following the terms of the Torah all over again. The temple won't be abused by power politics anymore, and people will devote themselves to observing the commands of the Torah.

So Nehemiah heads back to Persia on a business trip (Nehemiah ch. 12-13) only to return to Jerusalem and find that every one of these commitments has been compromised. The temple has been neglected and defiled. People are violating the Sabbath command. The problem of compromised marriages has gotten worse since Ezra's days.

And so the final chapter of Nehemiah (ch. 13) shows his response: "So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God..." - Nehemiah 13:25. Somehow, I have a feeling that none of the *Lessons for Leadership from Nehemiah* include this part of the story! That's because he is not being offered as a model for successful leadership. Rather, his experience is telling the truth about the human condition. Apparently, the disaster of the exile did not accomplish the transformation of the human heart. Even grave consequences don't bring about the deep level of healing required to change the human disposition. Israel's problem before the exile was a hard heart that resulted in rebellion against the terms of their covenant with God. And Israel's problem after the exile ... well, it's exactly the same.

What this tells us is that the new covenant promises of Jeremiah 31 had yet to be fully realized, and that even though the Israelites are back in their ancestral land, they are still in exile, spiritually speaking.

## **The Purpose**

When we turn to the opening pages of the New Testament and find John the Baptist going down to the Jordan River where Israel first entered the land, things should click. He's trying to lead a "new return" from exile, but the real return this time. That's why his "baptism" was a movement of repentance and forgiveness (see Mark ch. 1). John knew, as did Jesus, that what God's covenant people truly needed wasn't just a new temple building or a new city wall. They needed new hearts that could truly respond to God's love and grace with grateful devotion.

And this is the purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah in the overarching storyline of the Bible. The story shows that the return of many Israelites to Jerusalem was only one step toward the fulfillment of the prophetic hope of the new covenant and the kingdom of God. The full realization of that hope came only when God himself entered personally into Israel's story in the person of their messiah and king. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and through the gift of the Spirit, the story took a quantum leap forward ... and you will get to that part of the biblical story soon enough.

For the moment, it's worth reflecting on the fact that the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is a profound statement about leadership, but not the kind that's popular on Amazon.com. It's a realistic story about religious leaders who are unable to realize their dreams because of the impossible paradox of the human condition. Leaders cannot generate a true revival, but they certainly can prevent it from happening. Despite their best intentions, Ezra and Nehemiah are not able to accomplish the transformation of the human heart. And so these books are a literary memorial to the mixed-bag of leadership. Just because you have high ideals and divinely inspired passion doesn't mean God has to fulfill your dreams. Even the most capable leaders will tell you that the law of unintended consequences and inevitable human failure will compromise the best of our plans. But that doesn't mean Ezra and Nehemiah shouldn't have tried. Their stories give us hope and inspiration to keep pointing other people to God's grace and to keep calling them (and ourselves!) to faithfulness and devotion. But after pondering Ezra-Nehemiah, our pointing and calling should be done with a sober awareness that our efforts will likely be compromised. This doesn't mean God isn't faithful or good. It means that we're flawed humans whose fundamentally selfish nature can be transformed only by a generous gift of God's grace. Leaders who know this will lead with a humility and self-awareness that is hard to come by these days. And it's this kind of wisdom and "leadership lessons" that Ezra-Nehemiah offers to us.

And we're better off for hearing this message, if we have ears to hear.