

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 30: The Remnant of God in the World - Ezra and Nehemiah

Daily Reading for Week

- Ezra 8-10, Psalm 47
- Nehemiah 1-3, Psalm 48
- Nehemiah 4-6, Psalm 49
- Nehemiah 7-9, Psalm 50
- Nehemiah 10-11, Psalm 51
- Nehemiah 12-13, Psalm 52
- Esther 1-5, Psalm 53
- [Read Scripture Video: Ezra-Nehemiah](#)

Focus of time together

To follow the story of God's people post-exile, noticing and considering the complex relationship at hand between following God and navigating political systems.

Connecting Exercise

What's an unpopular conviction or opinion you hold? To whom is it unpopular? Maybe big or little, maybe cultural, spiritual, or political.

Opening Prayer

Leader: With all our hearts and with all our minds, let us pray to the Lord, saying "Lord, have mercy." For the peace from above, for the loving kindness of God, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the peace of the world, for the welfare of God's church, and for the unity of all peoples, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For all the people of our church, Reality San Francisco, for our children, for our volunteers, for our leaders, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For our President, for the leaders of the nations, and for all in authority, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the renewal of this neighbourhood, this city, for every city and community, and for those who live in them, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the good earth which God has given us, and for the wisdom and will to conserve and steward it, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the aged and infirmed, for the widowed and orphans, and for the sick and the suffering, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the poor and the oppressed, for the unemployed and the homeless, for prisoners and captives, and for all who remember and care for them, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For all who have died in the hope of the resurrection, and for all the departed, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For deliverance from all danger, violence, oppression, and humiliation, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

That we may end our lives in faith and hope, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Defend us, deliver us, and in your compassion protect us by your grace, Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

In accord with all believers over all time, in our church, and in our community here, let us commend ourselves, and one another, and all our life, to Christ our God.

Lord, have mercy. Amen.

Intro to Discussion

In recent weeks, we learned about the painful, grievous life in exile, even practicing lament in the way Scripture models in Jeremiah and Lamentations. We explored the Biblical concept of God's glory in Ezekiel and considered what God's presence and promises mean to us today. In parallel, during our Sunday morning series on Esther, sermons taught us about the exiled experience of God's people—the ways that they played along with Persian culture and were victim to it. Likewise, we were challenged to consider our present moment—the ways we wrongly play along with our culture's standards for dating/romance, as well as how we can be loving advocates in the face of racial injustice and death in America. That's where we've been, and here's where we're going.

Over the next few weeks, we will examine “The Remnant of God in the World” by taking a dive into Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books describe the lives of God's people following the exile, particularly exploring the ways God's people attempted to remain faithful in a sometimes friendly and occasionally hostile world. Today, we begin our journey in Ezra and Nehemiah.

As history in the Old Testament goes, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah mark the end of the story starting in Genesis. We read no more history until the Gospels. Tonewise, Ezra and Nehemiah are historical narratives that sometimes read like a courtroom drama (navigating the political system of royal decrees) mixed with an excel spreadsheet (multiple census and inventory lists), plus a bit of an action thriller (defending the construction of the city walls). At the centre of it is a spiritual narrative. A pagan king with a spiritual intuition decrees that a refugee people return to their homeland and seek to honour God by constructing a space for worship. Zerubbabel leads many of those in exile back to Jerusalem to build, Ezra attempts to spiritually purify the people, and Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem's city walls. These stories serve as a fulfilment of a prophecy in Jeremiah 25, in which God promises that the exiles will return.

After “the LORD stirred up the spirit” of King Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus decrees that the Temple must be reconstructed (Ezra 1:1-2). Led by Zerubbabel, the people lay the foundation of the Temple, but the glorious presence of God does not return like a cloud and flame to fill the Temple space, à la Exodus 13:21. God's house is under construction, but nobody appears to be home. The elders, therefore, are left distraught at the absence of God while the younger celebrate their accomplishments thus far (Ezra 3:11-13). In the courtroom drama of Ezra 4-6, the people defeat their legal opponents attempting to block the rebuilding and are given permission to complete the Temple. Construction's complete, but are Zerubbabel and his builders successful? Perhaps Ezra, an expert in the Law, can be of assistance.

King Artaxerxes sends Ezra to be a teacher of the Law and to make sacrifices and prayers for Artaxerxes and his son's prosperity (or at least to avoid God's wrath). Ezra teaches the Torah, which results in a lamenting confession of the masses. Ezra identifies the people's central sin and lambasts the inter-marrying occurring between

returning exiles and those who lived in the lands outside of Jerusalem—even going so far as to demand that these marriages be systematically annulled. It's forced divorce in an attempt to keep the Law of Moses and honor YHWH (Ezra 10). Though the temple is built and the Law is being established, Jerusalem remains vulnerable without city walls. Enter Nehemiah to help.

Grief-stricken at news of Jerusalem's disgrace, the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah, makes a bold and heartfelt request. King Artaxerxes gives Nehemiah the permission and resources to travel to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls. Despite dangerous opposition from outsiders, the walls go up, and Jerusalem is saved—Or is it? Ezra and Nehemiah gather the returning exiles for a multi-day public reading of the Law, which results in people confessing their sins, worshipping God, and joyfully feasting. All seems well in the land. The LORD has worshippers in His Temple and a people vow to keep His Law. Oddly, however, the book of Nehemiah ends with Nehemiah's sad realisation that the Jewish people's zeal for the Law is immediately lost, as people mix company with foreigners, neglect Temple sacrifices, and do not provide proper tithes. The reconstruction of hearts toward God is still necessary.

Ultimately, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe (not prescribe) how the remnant sought to practice faithful spirituality while navigating the political structures of their world. The exiles are not simply attempting to get home, but reclaiming their spiritual heritage through worship. And yet, following a spiritual path necessitates traveling a political path as well. The two are linked, because devotion to God is holistic—involving every dimension of one's life from spirituality to physicality, private life to politics.

Whole Group Discussion (65 minutes)

Questions for Listening to Scripture (25 minutes)

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. Imagine yourself post-exile in Jerusalem as you attempt the gruelling physical labour of rebuilding the Temple or the walls of Jerusalem, all while regularly facing opposition from outside political forces. How clear does the purpose of your efforts feel? What is the purpose?
2. Now imagine the rebuilding complete—the ecstasy of being free to worship according to the Law—and yet over time, you see the zeal of others and yourself fading. What motivates you and others to remain faithful to the Law?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture (40 minutes)

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. After the arduous task of rebuilding, a multi-day, communal meditation on the Law, and times of feasting, lament, and confession, the Levites lead a prayer in Nehemiah 9:5-38. This is a prayer of corporate identity in which the people recount their history. Please stand as a group and read this prayer together. After, consider the following questions:

- a. In this prayer, politics (the naming of rival nations/ideologies), history, confession, and vows all come together with remarkable specificity. Why is it important for the remnant to pray this prayer?
 - b. How could you identify with this prayer?
 - c. If we as a modern American church were to say a prayer like this, what would be important for us to include?
2. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah underscore the political dynamics at play in following God in the world. Currently, as we are near the height of a presidential election cycle and aware of numerous news items from racial injustice to terrorism to poverty to violence against police, in what ways must God have Lordship over our political convictions? To what degree are we tempted to over- or under-spiritualise our political engagement?
3. In light of your whole discussion, have a candid conversation about our Christian call in engaging American politics. With a posture of compassion, offer your convictions even if they are in disagreement with one another. Identify places of unity and honour places of disagreement. (Possible topics might include racial injustice, the presidential race, economic disparity, the role of law enforcement, and military operations.

Closing Prayer

Have a full-group open time of prayer, asking the Spirit for help in discerning the way to engage politics as Christians. Pray for obedient, wise, and united hearts.