

The Good Hand of God

Ezra + Nehemiah - NCBC, April 3, 2016

Main Point: **God sovereignly works to restore His unfaithful people.**

- **God restores His temple** (Ezra 1-6)
- **God restores His people** (Ezra 7-10)
- **God restores the wall** (Nehemiah 1-7)
- **God restores the worship of His people** (Nehemiah 8-13)

Application: **Hope again in the faithfulness of our Sovereign God.**

Opening Announcements:

The Walk – Julie – 3mins

<<Good Good Father>>



We have a good Father whose love for us is staggering, is it not? Amen.

I now invite you to prepare for our reading of God's Word from **2 Chronicles 36**. 2 Chronicles chapter 36. This is the last chapter in the Chronicles of Judah's history, and it appears immediately before Ezra in our English Bibles.

If you do not have a Bible with you today, our ushers are coming to give you a Bible. Please catch their attention as they pass by and it would be our joy to give you a Bible. You are welcome to take this Bible home as our gift to you, or just simply return it after our service by placing it on the table in the back of the room.

This morning we journey back over 2,500 years to the days of Ezra and Nehemiah as we begin our new sermon series called **God Restores**. And isn't this good news for us today – Our God is a restoring God. Our God is a rebuilding God. Our God is a resurrection God – who specializes in bringing beauty out of ashes, and joy out of sorrow.

So why an extended study on Ezra and Nehemiah for our church at this time? Well we are in the middle of a year-long focus on leadership development here at New Castle Bible Church. Our elders, deacons, and pastors are all seeking to grow in our understanding of God's good design for spiritual leadership. But our desire is not only to advance the spiritual leadership of our formal officers – but also to truly strengthen the spiritual leadership effectiveness of every ministry partner, parent, and disciple-maker in our membership.

Today I want to introduce us to some of the context that enriches a proper understanding of Ezra-Nehemiah. So let's start by reading the last part of **2 Chronicles 36** which helps set the stage for the words of Ezra and Nehemiah this morning.

You will find our text this morning on page **388** of the Bibles we've handed out. Please stand in honor God's Word, as I read **2 Chronicles 36:15-23** in the English Standard translation:

¹⁵ The Lord, the God of ...[the Jewish people], sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place.

¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in

the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹ And they burned the house of God [Solomon's Temple] and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

²² Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ²³ "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.' "

This is the biblical record of God's sovereign faithfulness to His people.

You may be seated.

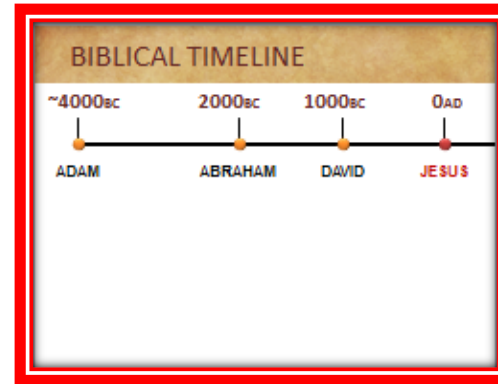
Let's Pray (for the broken, for the despairing)

Dear church, what God recorded through real people just like us some 2500 years ago was written for our instruction, that through the encouragement of these Scriptures we might have hope today.¹

I obviously do not know your disposition this morning. But some of you are hurting. Some of you are discouraged. Perhaps you are ready to give up this morning. Perhaps Satan's lies have started to become more believable for you lately, and you are beginning to wonder if God has moved on to greener pastures – leaving you to fend for yourself.

Well if that's you this morning – our Bibles are open to good news today. God is alive and well – He wants you to hear His Word this morning. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted... He saves the crushed in spirit.² So sit up and lean in this morning... open not just your Bible...but your heart to believe again. Open up your brokenness to God's sovereign and restoring grace.

Since the Old Testament may not be as well known to some of us, let's set the context a bit.

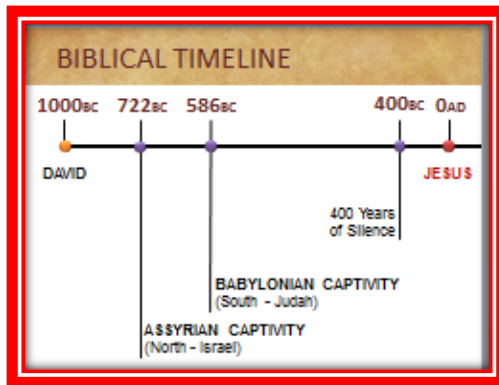


If you were to map out the Old Testament history of the human race, you could use this simple timeline. God created the world and Adam and Eve somewhere around 4000 BC. Approximately 2000 years later we meet Abraham and learn of God's plan for His chosen people. 1000 years later we see David being anointed as King over Israel, as a forerunner to the perfect Jesus Christ who isn't born until the year 3 or 4 B.C.

Historically, our present study of Ezra-Nehemiah focuses on this time between King David and the birth of Jesus Christ.

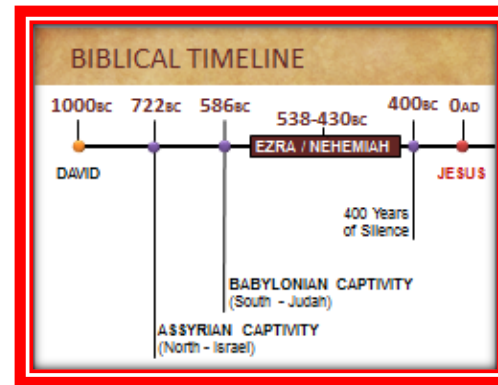
¹ Romans 15:4

² Psalm 34:18



In 931 BC the kingdom is divided into 10 northern tribes called Israel, and 2 southern tribes called Judah. Once the Davidic Kingdom is divided, idolatry begins to run its full course through God's chosen people. It is just a matter of time before judgment comes. In 722 BC God uses the Assyrians to execute His judgment on the northern tribes of Israel and take them away into captivity. And then just as we read from **2 Chronicles 36**, in 586 BC God exercises judgment upon the southern tribes of Judah and causes them to be carried away into Babylonian captivity.

So Ezra-Nehemiah happens,



after the Jews' exile in Babylon and records God's restoration of His people back to Judah. So this book provides a historical record of 538 to 430 BC, before the 400 years of prophetic silence prior to Jesus' birth.

Now as we approach Ezra-Nehemiah, I want us to understand that originally these two books were one complete book. The meticulous scribal markings on the earliest copies of Ezra-Nehemiah place the end notes at the end of Nehemiah, and mark the middle of the book at Nehemiah 3:2. So we have reason to believe that Ezra the scribe wrote not only 1 and 2 Chronicles, but also the entire book of Ezra and Nehemiah. (Some conjecture that Ezra may have also written the book of Esther as well?)

This means that when Nehemiah or others seem to be writing in the 1st person, just know that since Ezra was a respected scribe, he would have had access to all the Persian administrative documents, including Nehemiah's official diaries, which would have provided ample source documentation for the historical record of this book.

Now let's look at the structure of the book itself. The main point of this book, and our message this morning, is that,



God sovereignly works to restore His unfaithful people.

This is where we start to find hope for our lives today.

The people had been living in captivity for 70 years... so many of God's people were unfaithful to His law. Even the faithful Jews were broken down, weary, and despairing. But Ezra-Nehemiah stands in time as a strong testimony to the sovereign power of God...a God who restores.

Ezra + Nehemiah			
GOD RESTORES			
Ez. 1-6	Ez. 7-10	Neh. 1-7	Neh. 8-13
Restoring the Temple	Restoring the People	Restoring the Wall	Restoring Worship
Zerubbabel	Ezra	Nehemiah & Ezra	
Haggai & Zechariah	-	Malachi	
First Return 538 BC	Second Return 457 BC	Third Return 444 BC	

The book is divided into four main sections as it records the historical events surrounding three significant returns of Jews back to Jerusalem.

In Ezra 1-6 God sovereignly works to bring nearly 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem largely under the leadership of the governor Zerubbabel. These 6 chapters recount how God worked to restore the temple at Jerusalem in the midst of severe opposition. When Zerubbabel and the people get discouraged and stop working on the temple, God raises up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to continue so that the restored temple is actually finished and dedicated by the end of Ezra 6.

There's a time lapse of almost 60 years between chapter 6 and chapter 7 during which time the book of Esther records what happened to the Jews who remained behind in Babylon under the Persian rule.

Then in chapters 7-10 we meet Ezra for the first time. God raises him up to lead a group of almost 2000 Jewish

exiles back to Jerusalem to help spiritually restore God's people who were now living in Jerusalem.

Then approximately 13 years later, God moves within the heart of the Persian king's cupbearer to lead a 3rd return of God's people back to Judah. Nehemiah 1-7 testifies to God's sovereign workings to restore the walls of Jerusalem, and chapters 8-13 focus on the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah together as God works through them and the prophet Malachi to help restore faithful worship from the hearts of unfaithful people.

So Ezra-Nehemiah is a historical record of God's restoring power. God sovereignly working through both unbelievers and believers to accomplish His eternal purposes.

As you read through Ezra-Nehemiah, you notice the same phrase is repeated 8 times throughout the book. I'd like to trace this theme through the book with you this morning. The phrase is,

The hand of God.

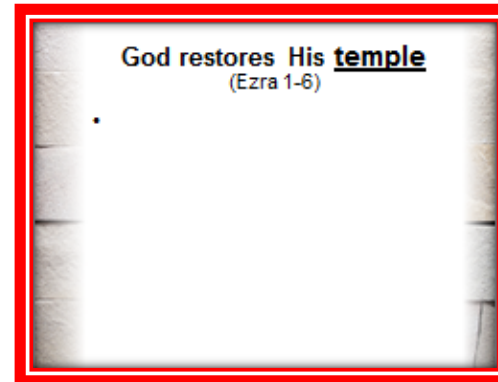
The good hand of God is working behind the scenes to sovereignly restore His unfaithful people.

Have you thought recently about God's good hand working in your life?

If you are discouraged or brokenhearted this morning – let the truth of God's active and restoring hand encourage your heart. God is alive. And the good hand

of our active God is able to provide all that you need in order for you to joyfully live for His pleasure.

So let's start in Ezra chapters 1-6, where we find **God sovereignly working to restore His temple.** (Ezra 1-6)



Open your Bible to Ezra chapter 1, and as I read the first three verses, look for evidences of God's sovereign working:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Now do not miss the remarkable wonder of God's sovereign working through a pagan king. Cyrus was one of the world's most powerful rulers in his day ...

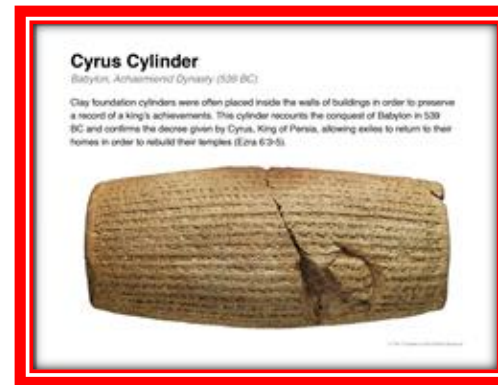


...his Persian Empire ruled most of the known world east of the Greeks.

But God is a greater ruler still! Yahweh is able to stir the heart of King Cyrus to fulfill specific prophecy that was given to God's people through Isaiah and Jeremiah some 100 years before Cyrus was even born!³

When Jody and I visited the British Museum several years ago, we were able to personally view a clay cylinder that was discovered inside a wall in ancient Babylon.

³ Isaiah 44:21-28, 45:1-13; Jeremiah 25:11-12



This piece of baked clay records Cyrus' accomplishments in the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539BC, and includes the decree given by Cyrus allowing the exiles to return to their homes in order to rebuild their temple. The Cyrus Cylinder serves as an inarguable testimony to the historicity of Scripture today. When the 70 years of exile were completed, God sovereignly moved the heart of Cyrus the Great to send the Jews back to rebuild their temple.

Remember how important the temple was to God's people. This wasn't just like the modern church-house. Without the temple and its altar there was no proper sacrifice for sins. Ever since the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon's temple in 586BC, God's people did not have a place to meet with God and make proper sacrifice for their sins.

No wonder then that the first priority of God's restoring work was to sovereignly provide a means of atonement for sin.

So in verse 1 God sovereignly moves the heart of Cyrus the Great, and then again in verse 5 we see God stirring up the spirits of 50,000 exiled Jews to return back to Jerusalem for this purpose.

Flip on over to the end of **chapter 6** and consider the joyful celebration once Zerubbabel's temple had been completed. In **verse 22 of chapter 6** we read,

And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

In other words, God's good hand was working behind the scenes for the joy of His people. Joy that is rooted in God's provision of atonement for sin.

Now I want to pull the bus over for a moment and ask you a personal question in light of this. How do you handle the problem of your sin? I'm not asking for a Sunday school answer – I'm asking you to reflect honestly on how you live and think and respond to your own sin. What do you do with the problem of your own sin?

You see our own personal sin is the greatest problem in our lives... for it is the only problem that will go with us when we die.

Our health problems don't go beyond the grave. Our financial problems don't reach beyond death's door. And

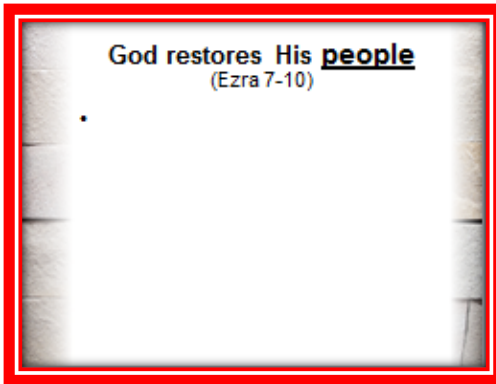
neither do our relationship disappointments. But our sin remains with us when we die.

So where do you find resolution for your sin?

Have you ever caught yourself trying to make up for your sins by doing something good? While you might be able to eventually win over your spouse or your friend with enough good deeds – such actions can never satisfy a holy God. For every sin single-handedly requires your death.

Only Jesus Christ can completely pay for sin and make atonement. He is the only sacrifice that can take away our sins forever. The temple sacrifices pointed to His final sacrifice...and so today those who believe in Jesus Christ become living temples of God's Spirit. So stop looking to your own obedience for your peace. Repent and look to Christ's sacrifice – He alone has the sovereign power to eternally rescue you from your problem with sin.

God sovereignly works to restore His unfaithful people. And that's what we see in the second half of Ezra that,



God restores His people by His good hand.

When **chapter 7** introduces us to Ezra, notice how **verse 6** introduces this scribe:

This Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on Him.

And then again at the end of **verse 9**,

For the good hand of his God was on him.

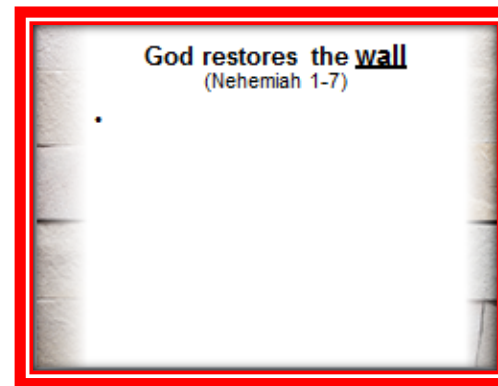
The sovereign God of heaven and earth was with Ezra to empower His spiritual ministry of teaching and prayer.

As you read through chapters 7-10, you'll notice Ezra was responsibly studying, teaching, recruiting, planning, fasting, and praying all as evidence that God's good hand was with Him. For a proper belief in God's sovereignty compels personal involvement in ministry. Divine sovereignty warrants human responsibility. Faith in

God's active hand only commissions our hands His good works.

Do you see the good hand of God's Spirit moving for restoration of others around you today?

In the first section of Nehemiah, we see more evidence of God's sovereign work. For God powerfully works to



restore the wall of Jerusalem in powerful demonstration of His divine authority and help.

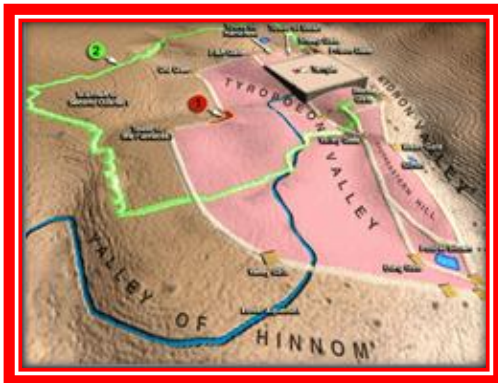
Look quickly with me at **Nehemiah chapter 2, verse 8**. Why did the Persian King grant his own personal advisor such a leave of absence from his important responsibilities in the kingdom?

The end of Nehemiah 2:8 says – *And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*

And when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and finds the walls of the city broken down and the people in disrepair, how does he seek to encourage the people to join with him in the work? **Verse 18 of Nehemiah 2** he says,

And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Restoring the wall of Jerusalem was a major project. As you can see in this diagram,



Nehemiah was planning to rebuild the walls around the entire pink section. (the green walls represent the city walls later built by Herod which still surround the old City of Jerusalem today.) So to build a wall by hand that was nearly 2 miles in length that was over 20' wide in some

places and over 15' tall was a project for the hand of God Himself. The good hand of God working powerfully through the strengthened hands of His people to accomplish His good plan.

So when you face a monumental obstacle or are called to a ministry that is way beyond your own abilities... strengthen your hands *in the present* by reminding yourself of the faithfulness of God's good hand *in your past*. Remember how God's hand has been on your life for good, and know that God Himself will fight for His glory.

Look at Nehemiah chapter 6 verses 15-16,

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

God glorifies His own Name through miraculous restoration. Even unfaithful people can't ignore the evidence of the good hand of God.

Finally then, in the last section of Nehemiah, we note how God sovereignly works to



restore the worship of His people (Nehemiah 8-13)

Right worship always starts in response to God's revelation. And that's what we observe in **Nehemiah 8, verse 5**,

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.

...and then skip down to **verse 8**, ...*They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

Right worship joyfully responds to God's Word in confession and repentance from sin. So in chapters 9-12, the people are called to confess sins, renew their commitment to God's covenant, and pursue greater intentionality with prayer and the observance of the Sabbath. But unfortunately in the end, the people only prove themselves unfaithful... in need of the Messiah who alone can deliver hearts from slavery to sin.

So three times at the end of the book Nehemiah prays,

Remember me, O my God, for good.

He knows that even though the people remain unfaithful, God's good hand can be trusted to do what is right in the end. Ezra and Nehemiah both trusted in a sovereign God. An eternal God. A righteous and holy God who alone possess all power to right the wrongs and restore that which has been broken down.



Ezra-Nehemiah teaches us that God sovereignly works to restore His unfaithful people.

So what does this mean for us? I suggest the following takeaway from this overview of Ezra-Nehemiah:



Hope again in the faithfulness of our Sovereign God.

Let the faithfulness of God's good hand encourage you this morning. The God who restored the temple is your God. He's made all the provisions you need for forgiveness, peace, and daily communion with Him through the sacrifice of His sinless Son on your behalf. If you believe in Jesus Christ – you can hope again!

Some of you find yourself completely trapped in the quicksand of ever-deepening sin this morning. Hope again in the faithfulness of our all-powerful God! The God who restored His people who were intermarrying with foreigners is the same God who can unwind the mess of your sin and set you free again!

Others today are completely broken down. Perhaps by walking into church this morning you're just giving God one last chance to speak to you before you walk away without hope for any future restoration. Dear friend – hear the message of the good hand of God. Hope again in God's faithfulness – strengthen your heart by reminding yourself of God's past faithfulness. Journal a

log of all the ways God has sovereignly worked in your past to show you His faithfulness.

Let this build your hope. Our God is sovereign God. We can trust His love to accomplish His eternal purposes for His eternal glory. We have reason to hope...again. Our God is faithful.



Let's pray. **Closing prayer.**

<<Your Love O Lord>>

Benediction

Now, may we go forth and bless the Lord our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with His unfaithful people from everlasting to everlasting.

Nehemiah 9:5, 32