

CrossWise Living | Bible Study Series

# Ezra & Nehemiah

*A study of Restoration,  
Renewal & Revival*

Dr. Gail Bones



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## Dedication

To my faithful Thursday Morning Bible study buddies. Your encouragement and participation have been a lifeline to me during this crazy time of lockdown and pandemic. Thank you for your prayers and for staying true to the study of God's Word. You inspire me with your depth and devotion! Martha Avery, Jill Geary, Amy Gray, Amanda Hayden, Nali Hilderman, Barbara Hughes, Shirley Klein, Sandra Sladkey, Toni Smith, Jackie Willis and Sherri Winkless,

*"Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name."*

MALACHI 3:16

# Ezra & Nehemiah

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## About the Author

Gail Nelson Bones, Ed.D., is the founder of CrossWise Living, a ministry devoted to helping people at all stages in life navigate change through cross-generational relationships. She has been engaging audiences as a speaker, songwriter, and worship leader for over thirty years. Formerly a professor of education at San Diego Christian College, Dr. Bones is the award-winning author of *Living Cross Wise: Hope and Help for Navigating Transition* (2013).

Gail and her husband Jeff have been married for 40 years and together have recorded seven albums of original Christian music. Along with their now-grown children, they spent many years presenting family concerts at churches across the United States. Gail is currently a women's ministry leader at her home church, a worship leader, and doting grandmother.



## Suggestions for Weekly Sessions

1. **Continue to invite participation** during the whole group sessions. You will note that most of even the informational, textual questions require critical thinking.
2. **Ask the Holy Spirit to guide** you each week as you choose the questions you want to emphasize in your whole group lesson since you will probably not have a chance to go over each question.
3. **Ask participants to mark the italicized application questions** they are most interested in discussing in their small groups before they come to class. You may rotate the facilitation of discussion within the small groups each week.
4. **Prayer Requests.** As the leader, monitor the time. When you have about 15-20 minutes left for your session, announce that it is time to transition to prayer requests. Space is provided in the back of the book for recording these in the workbook. Have a plan for those times when someone needs some extra TLC or prayer—does your church have a counseling or prayer ministry? Is there someone who is willing to stay late to meet with ladies who might need extra support?
5. **For discussion leaders:** You will not be able to go over each question during your group time. I have italicized the personal application questions so you can make sure to include some of those in your discussion. Expect that there will be questions that will remain unanswered. Leave room for participants to share their “lingering questions.” As your group members combine their knowledge and insight with a reliance on the Holy Spirit as your teacher, you will likely come to understand sections of Scripture you have always wondered about. Pray for the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment!

I leave you with one of my favorite promises in Scripture:

*“Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.” – Malachi 3:16 (NLT)*

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# Ezra & Nehemiah

# LESSON 1

*“With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord:  
‘He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.’  
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

# INTRODUCTION / HISTORY OF ISRAEL

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*“Ezra opened the book...and as he opened it, the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” –Nehemiah 8:5-6 (NIV)*

## **Restoration • Renewal • Revival**

As we apply ourselves to study the Old Testament account of what has been called “The Second Exodus,” we find themes as relevant today as they were when this history was recorded. When it seems that all around us lies in ruins, we long for a second chance, we pray for revival, and we look to God for the strength to begin to rebuild.

God’s prophets warned his people that they would face the judgment of exile for disobedience and idolatry. At the same time, God gave them assurance that he would initiate a return and restoration after seventy years had passed. The books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* tell the story of that promise fulfilled. We’ll observe that revival occurs when two crucial elements are renewed: obedience to God’s Word and worship. Our study of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* will build our faith in the God who keeps his promises and holds all things—the fate of nations and the fate of individuals—in his hands.

Our great privilege as believers is to approach God through his Word for answers to our daily problems and concerns. Read through the list below and mark any of these needs you would like to bring to the Lord as together we commit to diligent, regular study of the Scriptures.

- ☐ As the world seems to grow increasingly darker and more chaotic, I need reassurance of God’s sovereign control of the universe.
- ☐ I’ve experienced losses, reversals, or disappointments and I need reassurance that God’s hand is upon me to guide and strengthen me as I rebuild.
- ☐ I long for spiritual revival both in my own heart and in the body of Christ. I need to understand the steps God has in place that would lead to that end.
- ☐ I love and worship God, but sometimes I feel anxious, fearful, or frustrated. I need to know how to combat and overcome these emotions.
- ☐ I sense God’s call to leadership and I need to see examples of effective secular and spiritual leadership.
- ☐ I know my prayer-life could use a tune-up. I need instruction on how to pray more faithfully, fervently, and effectively.
- ☐ I believe in the importance of daily study of the Bible, but I need to have structure and accountability in order to maintain that good habit.
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_

## BEFORE WE BEGIN...

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Before we begin this journey together in earnest, let me both challenge and reassure you. The homework is designed to be done daily because our goal is to spend time with the Lord daily. I understand things happen and you may have to play catch-up every once in a while. BUT I encourage you to make the effort to make this a daily discipline and habit. Take advantage of the fact that your Bible study buddies are accountability partners. If you read his word daily, you will hear from him daily. What could be better?

Also, let me reassure you. You will notice that the first few days of the first week are longer—that is because we are taking the time to do some background study. Don't be put off by what looks like a daunting fill-in the blank test right from the start! Some of you may be new to the Bible and you won't have any idea how to fill in any of those blanks. Not to worry. Spoiler alert—all the answers are right at the end of the exercise. For those of you who do have some background in reading the Scriptures, having to think and bring these names back from the far recesses of your memory will get your brain warmed up and ready to go! You will probably surprise yourself at how much you already know!—For the first week we will be doing “big picture” reading. You'll be surveying large sections of Scripture that you most likely have read many times before. Looking again at these familiar passages fairly quickly will help us to understand the context and the individuals involved in this intimate scene, one of the most beautiful in all of Scripture.

Later, in the weeks ahead, we will slow way down and do “close reading,” wherein we will read and reread small portions of our text, analyzing, looking for detail, annotating shorter passages, jotting in the margins our questions and observations about that which we find significant, or surprising, or even puzzling. At that time I will encourage you to print out a double-spaced copy of the chapter we are studying so you can read with a pen and colored pencils in order to draw the most meaning possible from each precious verse of God's Word.

## IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT OUR BIBLE STUDY METHOD:

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You'll derive immeasurably more from your study of God's Word if you'll take the time to print, read, and annotate each chapter. Internet sites like [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) will allow you to choose your translation and print out each chapter with a wide margin for notes. (I prefer to use a translation different from the one I ordinarily read—I like the Amplified Classic Version). Read each chapter several times and enjoy your freedom to underline, color code, write questions and observations on your printed sheets. You can circle key words or mark sections that speak loudest to you in a different color. Ask and expect the Holy Spirit to reveal new layers and shades of meaning each time you re-read the text.



# DAY ONE: INTRODUCTION

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1. Facing the devastation we see often all around us: tragedies and trials brought about by the enemy, by our own sin, or by the sins of others, we can find encouragement to continue to live in hope, rather than fear, by these words of the prophet Isaiah:

*“Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:30-31).*

- a. In your own words, what is the promise found in this passage?
  - b. What is the condition of receiving that promise?
  - c. Write a prayer of response using phrases from these verses.
- 
2. As believers, we are called by God to pray for revival: *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).*
    - a. In your own words, what is the promise found in this passage?
    - b. What is the condition of receiving that promise?
    - c. Using phrases from this verse, write a prayer of intercession.

3. We all encounter many situations in our personal lives during which we must do the hard work of beginning again after a trial or transition. Identify and comment on your experience with having to rebuild in the areas listed below:
  - a. Health
  - b. Marriage
  - c. Family
  - d. Moving
  - e. Career/Retirement
  - f. Spiritual Life/Walk with God
  - g. Ministry/Church Involvement
  - h. Personal Failure
  - i. Other
4. Why is it sometimes harder to rebuild than to build in the first place?
5. Where in your life have you experienced success in rebuilding with the Lord's help?

# DAY TWO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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*Ezra* and *Nehemiah* were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible, telling the story of the rebuilding of the city walls and temple in Jerusalem after the 70-year Babylonian captivity was over. A review of the history of the Israelites up to this point will help us with the context. See how many of the blanks you can fill in from your prior study of the Bible. This question is designed more for refreshing your knowledge than it is for group discussion, so no pressure! You will find the answers at the end of the exercise.

## ***Brief History of Israel***

1. God called \_\_\_\_\_ out of Ur and sent him to Canaan, where he promised the land to this man and his descendants. God also told him he'd be the founder of a new nation through which he'd bless all people on earth. He is considered the first patriarch, and the father of the Jewish race. He almost sacrificed his son named \_\_\_\_\_, who became the father of \_\_\_\_\_, who had 12 sons who became the heads of 12 tribes of Israel. (See Genesis 11:31—12:7)
2. One of Jacob (Israel)'s sons, \_\_\_\_\_, was sold into slavery by his brothers. God was with him, however, and he rose to become the most powerful official in Pharaoh's court. Years later, when a famine drove his brothers to Egypt in search of food, they were reunited and reconciled. The entire family moved to Egypt with Pharaoh's blessing and became prosperous in the land. Their numbers multiplied greatly. (See Genesis 37, 39-47; Exodus 1:1-5)
3. As the years passed, a new regime came into power in Egypt, Joseph was forgotten, and the Israelites were enslaved. God raised up a Hebrew who had been raised by Pharaoh's daughter, to deliver his people from bondage (Exodus 1:6—4:19). \_\_\_\_\_ led his people out of bondage in Egypt, received the 10 Commandments, and wrote the Torah (Exodus).
4. Rebellion and unbelief on the part of the children of Israel resulted in 40 years of wilderness wandering under the leadership of Moses. Their wandering ended when God called the warrior \_\_\_\_\_ to lead them across the \_\_\_\_\_ River and into the conquest of \_\_\_\_\_, a.k.a. "The Promised Land" (Joshua).
5. After the death of Joshua, judges ruled over Israel for 400 years. Gideon and Samson lived during these times marked by sin and rebellion against God. Each man did what was right in his own eyes. The people wanted to be like other nations and so demanded a king. God conceded to their demand and gave them \_\_\_\_\_ as the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 9).
6. Because of his rebellion and disobedience, Saul was removed as king by God, who replaced him with a shepherd boy named \_\_\_\_\_. Although Israel's second king wrote many Psalms and was called a "man after God's own heart," his sins of adultery and murder caused both the death of his infant son and chaos in his kingdom. Because of this, when he wanted to build a temple for God, God said no. He replied that while he would give David the plans, his son \_\_\_\_\_, whose mother was \_\_\_\_\_, would succeed him as king and would be the one to build the temple. During these golden years of Israel, the nation grew in prosperity as well as size and military might (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings).

7. After Solomon's death, his son \_\_\_\_\_ followed him on the throne, but was a foolish leader (1 Kings 11:26). The ten northern tribes rebelled against him under the leadership of \_\_\_\_\_ and the kingdom split. The northern kingdom was then called \_\_\_\_\_ and no good kings ever reigned there. The southern kingdom, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became known as \_\_\_\_\_ and just a few of those kings remained faithful to God.
8. Because of their rebellion and idolatry, God allowed the northern kingdom to be conquered by the \_\_\_\_\_ in 721 B.C. The conquerors removed all the Jews but the weak ones from the land and re-populated the area with captives from other nations. The resulting population had a religion that was a mixture of Jewish and pagan beliefs. This region was known as \_\_\_\_\_. The race of people that resulted from all the intermingling of cultures and religious beliefs became known as the \_\_\_\_\_ (2 Kings).
9. Just as God's prophets had warned, the southern kingdom was vanquished and Solomon's Temple destroyed in 586 B.C. by the \_\_\_\_\_ led by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles).
10. The Medo-Persian Empire eventually conquered both Babylon and Assyria and their leader \_\_\_\_\_ allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Although there were about a million Jews living in Babylon at this time, only about 50,000 desired to return to their ancestral homeland. They did so in three waves. The first group returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Once there, they rebuilt the \_\_\_\_\_ on its former site despite delays and opposition (Ezra).
11. Around 60 years after the first wave of Jews returned, a priest named \_\_\_\_\_ brought another large group back to their homeland. While there, he reintroduced the people to the scriptures and a season of repentance and revival followed (Ezra).
12. Thirteen years later, a Jew born in exile \_\_\_\_\_, who had the trusted position of cupbearer to the King of Persia, learned that the walls of Jerusalem had never been rebuilt, and that his people were weak, demoralized and vulnerable. Grieved by this, he left his position of influence and led the third wave of Jews from Babylon back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls (Nehemiah).

## Answers

1. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob
2. Joseph
3. Moses
4. Joshua, Jordan River, Canaan
5. Saul
6. David, Solomon, Bathsheba
7. Rehoboam, Jeroboam, Israel, Judah
8. Assyrians, Samaria, Samaritans
9. Babylonians
10. Cyrus, the temple
11. Ezra
12. Nehemiah



## SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT PASSAGES

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You are probably familiar with the prophet Daniel, famous for having survived the Lion's Den. He was one of the Jews taken captive by the Babylonians in 605 B.C. He served in the government in Babylon for 60 years during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius (the one who put him in the Lion's Den) and Cyrus.

1. Read Daniel 1:1-21.
  - a. What do you learn about life for the Jewish captives in Babylon?
  - b. When does it say that Daniel left Babylon?
2. Read Jeremiah 25:1-14. Jeremiah prophesied over a period of 40 years during the reigns of the final 5 kings of Judah, right up to the Babylonian captivity. The first deportation began in 605 B.C. and Jerusalem was finally destroyed in 586 B.C.
  - a. How specific was this prophecy?
  - b. Who does God call his servant?
3. Read Isaiah 44:26-28. Isaiah prophesied from about 740-681 B.C.—150 years before these events occurred! Who was named specifically?
4. Read 2 Chronicles 36:11-23 regarding the fall of Jerusalem.
  - a. What does the text say about Israel's leaders and people?
  - b. What does the text say about Jeremiah's prophecies?
  - c. What does the text say about God's heart for the people?
  - d. What do we learn about God from this passage?

# DAY THREE: EZRA 1 AND 2

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Ezra was a priest, a scribe, and one of Israel's great leaders. Our story opens in 538 B.C., "the first year of Cyrus king of Persia." Although the Jews were exiles in Babylon, forcibly relocated by their conquerors, they were not slaves as they had been in Egypt. Unlike their ancestors who'd been ruthlessly forced into hard labor, they were able to live relatively comfortably in their new land. Many owned homes and engaged in commerce or agriculture. Some even rose to positions of wealth or prominence in the government, as did Daniel, Mordecai, and Esther. This is significant because when the Jews were offered a chance to voluntarily return to their homeland, many did not want to undergo the hardships of starting over. Only a small percentage of those who were eligible chose to make the arduous trip home to return and rebuild. Although there were over a million Jews living in Babylon, only about 50,000 made the 900-mile, 4-month journey on foot back to their ruined homeland.

Those whose hearts led them to return did so in three waves:

- (1) 538 B.C.—50,000 people returned after the decree by Cyrus, led by Zerubbabel. It took them 20 years of struggle to rebuild the temple.
- (2) 458 B.C.—2,000 men and their families returned after a decree by Artaxerxes, led by Ezra. He was a reformer who challenged the people about their disobedience and cold hearts. His mission was to teach them the importance of God's Law.
- (3) 445 B.C.—Nehemiah led another small group back after being given permission by Artaxerxes to return to rebuild the wall which remained in ruins. Without the protection of the wall, the Israelites could not return to live in their city or to center their lives around the temple and the worship of God.

1. Read and annotate Ezra 1. What strikes you as especially significant or relevant? What questions do you have?
2. From Ezra 1:1-11.
  - a. Who made the decree? When? Why? Who was allowed to go? Matthew 17:1-9
  - b. Have you ever seen God ever use or speak through unbelievers? What does this passage say to us about God's sovereignty? What specific encouragement do you take from this today?
  - c. From this chapter, whose hearts does God move?
  - d. Have you been aware of God moving your heart toward any specific mission, ministry, or action to take?

3. How was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem financially made possible? What principle do you see here?
4. What did Cyrus return that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen? Why was this significant?
5. Ezra 1:9-2:70 is a passage made of mostly of lists. Why are such lists important enough to be recorded in Scripture?
6. Take a few moments to read through the lists in chapter 2. What stands out to you?

# DAY FOUR: EZRA 3

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1. Read and annotate Ezra 3. What strikes you as especially significant or relevant? What questions do you have?
  
2. From Ezra 3:1-13
  - a. After settling in their towns, what was the first thing the Israelites did to fulfill the work God had called them to? Why was this so important?
  
  - b. What does this teach us about priorities in the life of a believer?
  
  - c. What would be the equivalent in your life: i.e. what kinds of things is it important for you to prioritize in your day? What is your plan in this regard?
  
3. From Ezra 3:1-3
  - a. What challenge did they face and how did they handle it? What phrase is key to understanding their success?
  
  - b. What was the first feast they celebrated? See Leviticus 23:33-36. What was being celebrated during that feast? What significance do you see here?
  
4. After first building the altar in order to make the required sacrifices, Zerubbabel appointed the Levites to supervise the work on the house of God.
  - a. How did the people celebrate once the foundations were laid?
  
  - b. Why were some people weeping? What lesson can we draw from this?



# DAY FIVE: EZRA 3

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Worship of God is a priority, as evidenced by the Jews who returned taking the all-important step of rebuilding the altar first. Generations earlier, even before Solomon's Temple was built David brought the Ark of the Lord to Jerusalem and placed it in a tent so as to provide a designated place for worship. (You may remember the story of David celebrating like mad in his underwear while his wife looked on in disgust?)

1. With Ezra 3:10 and 11, read 1 Chronicles 16:4-12. What specific things did the Levites do when they ministered before the ark of the Lord?
2. Take a moment to worship the Lord today by meditating on David's Psalm of Thanksgiving. Which passages stand out to you?
3. Why is music such an important part of our worship to God? What is your preferred method or style?

## WEEKLY REVIEW

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1. What have you learned about the character of God this week?
2. What have you learned about yourself this week? How have you been able to apply what you learned?
3. What is an important principle or truth you want to remember from this week?
4. What comment or insight during the discussion was helpful?
5. Do you have any lingering questions?