**The Story of the Old Testament**

**Lecture #6 –Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther**

**The Continued Progression of Fulfillment: Return & Future Expectation**

1. **Worship**

*No Other Like You* by Jesus Culture.

1. **Quick Review of the Covenants**

Does anyone remember the **6 covenants**? Let’s review them. You will find me repeating myself over and over again on the main parts of the story because that is the only way that I can learn and, I believe, that anyone can learn (unless you have a photographic memory, and, in that case, I don’t like you very much!). So, here they are:

* **The Adamic Covenant (#1) – Genesis 2**
* **The Noahic Covenant (#2) – Genesis 9**
* **The Abrahamic Covenant (#3) – Genesis 12, 15, 17**
* **The Mosaic Covenant (#4) – Exodus 19-24**
* **The Davidic Covenant (#5) – 2 Samuel 7**
* **The New Covenant (#6) – Hint in Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:22-32, Deut. 30:6**

1. **Ezra** (10 chapters - takes about *½ an hour* to read for the average person)
   1. *Placement on the Storyline?*

In the Hebrew canon, Ezra is placed before 1-2 Chronicles and in our English Bibles, Ezra is placed after 1-2 Chronicles. Helpful insight can be gleaned from either order, but the order in our English Bibles flows nicely for Ezra picks up right where 1-2 Chronicles left off![[1]](#footnote-1)

At the end of Chronicles, the “whisper of hope” that ended 1-2 Kings is turned into a shout as we hear Cyrus king of Persia[[2]](#footnote-2) announce the end of the exile and the permitted return of the people of the Lord: “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: ‘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.’” (2 Chronicles 36:22-23)

These are the exact proclamation, with some additions, that begins the book of Ezra! With that in mind, where are we in the progressive fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises as we begin Ezra?

* *Land* – as the book begins, we are still in exile but the proclamation of the exile’s end is set forth at the beginning of the book
* *Numerous offspring* – we are not told, exactly, but Israel and Judah, no doubt, suffered great numeric loss in the time of the exile and were scattered among the nations
* *Worldwide blessing* – still seems a bit out of reach but now is potentially possible once more as the return to the Land has been announced by Cyrus king of Persia

1. *The Remnant Returns & Rebuilds the Temple (1-6)*

As we noted above, Ezra begins with the proclamation of the end of the exile by Cyrus king of Persia. Cyrus instructs the people of the Lord to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the house of the Lord. Cyrus also instructs the people of the places in which the people of the Lord are currently in exile to assist the people of the Lord “with silver and gold, with goods and with beats, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:4) As the Lord provided for the people of Israel with Egyptian wealth during the exodus for the construction of the Tabernacle, so the Lord is providing the people of Israel with wealth from the lands of their exile for the rebuilding of the Temple!

As the Spirit of the Lord moved Cyrus to make the proclamation that the exile was ended, so the Spirit of the Lord moves in the hearts of a portion of the Lord’s people to return to the Promised Land to rebuild the Temple. (Ezra 1:5) We learn in Ezra 2:64 that the total assembly that returned was 42,360. That is a drastic reduction in the number of people within the nation of Israel[[3]](#footnote-3) and we have clearly regressed in the progression of the Lord’s promise to Abraham of numerous offspring.

Ezra 3 begins with Israel gathering in Jerusalem, rebuilding the altar of the Lord, and offering sacrifices in according with the Law of Moses. (Ezra 3:1-6) The focus is then shifted upon the laying of the Temple’s foundation. (Ezra 3:8-10) The laying of the foundation provoked both profound praise and mourning. (Ezra 3:10-13) The mixture of praise and mourning was blended together “so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout form the sound of the people’s weeping. . . .” (Ezra 3:13) Schreiner notes: “The laying of the foundation of the temple provoked praise and weeping-praise because it was a new beginning, weeping because the foundation was nothing like the old temple.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The joy of the Lord’s new work in fulfillment of his covenant promises was mixed with the bitter sadness that flows from Israel’s previous rebellion against the Lord.

The Lord was once again working through the line of restoration to bring about the fulfillment of his redemptive promises. However, the Lord’s progressive fulfillment of his redemptive promises has never come without opposition. The Lord made clear in Genesis 3:15 that enmity would exist until the bitter end between the line of rebellion and line of restoration. The opposition of the line of rebellion is clearly seen as we begin Ezra 4.

Ezra 4:1 introduces into the story the “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin.” These adversaries tried to infiltrate the ranks of Israel and, no doubt, bring destruction from within by offering to help with the construction of the Temple. (Ezra 4:2) But the leadership of Israel that had returned saw through the smokescreen of feigned allegiance: “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.” (Ezra 4:3)

After the adversaries introduced in Ezra 4:1 plan of infiltration failed, they went to more overt tactics and “discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose.” (Ezra 4:4) The adversaries were successful in their ploy of preventing the construction of the Temple for a period of approximately 15 years![[5]](#footnote-5) (Ezra 4:24)

The victory of the line of rebellion was only short lived, however, and the courage of the line of restoration was renewed again through the word of the Lord delivered by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. (Ezra 5:1) With their hearts revived and strengthened, the leadership of the returned remnant resumed the construction of the Temple. (Ezra 5:2)

The line of rebellion struck again as the construction resumed. But, the “eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews” (Ezra 5:5) and the line of restoration was given victory of the line of rebellion because of the decree previously made by Cyrus in response to the Lord’s “stirring.” (Ezra 1:1) On the basis of Cyrus’s degree, the representatives of the line of rebellion who were attempting to prevent the completion of the Temple were told this by king Darius: “[K]eep away. Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.” (Ezra 6:6-7) Further, the line of rebellion was ordered by Darius to fund the construction they opposed: “Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. And whatever is needed-bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require-let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.” (Ezra 6:8-10) As if that wasn’t glorious enough news for the line of restoration, Darius further orders the destruction of anyone who attempted to further thwart the building of the Temple: “Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 6:11-12)

Talk about an unexpected turn in the story for the line of rebellion. They went seeking the destruction of the Temple. Now they were ordered to facilitate the construction of the Temple and the worship that would take place there! Schreiner rightly notes that the Lord “will sovereignly accomplish his will through rulers and political functionaries, for he is the king of the universe.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The victory of the line of restoration is seen in the completion of the Temple’s construction in 516 B.C.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The mourning that was present at the laying of the Temple’s foundation appears to be absent at the Temple’s dedication as “the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.” (Ezra 6:16) Priests were established pursuant to the Book of Moses and the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated with joy. (Ezra 6:18-22)

This is a beautiful moment in the story of the Old Testament. What had been destroyed because of the covenant curses that flowed from disobedience had been rebuilt because of the covenant faithfulness of the Lord and the joyful obedience of his people. The Lord was not done with Israel. The Lord was done with the progressive fulfillment of his redemptive promises. The rebuilt Temple was a visual representation of the Lord’s continued faithfulness of a people who clearly did not deserve the grace they had received.

But, there is something that is noticeably absent. When the Tabernacle was completed in Exodus 40, the glory of the Lord descended in such a powerful way that Moses was not able to enter. When the Temple was completed the first time, the glory of the Lord descended on the Temple in such a powerful way that the priests could not stand to minister. (1 Kings 8:10-11) But, we do not see the glory of the Lord descending upon the Temple after its reconstruction. That is an extremely significant omission. The Temple has been rebuilt, but not all has been restored.

1. *Ezra Returns & Remnant Reminded* (7-10)

We jump 57 years forward as we leave Ezra 6 and begin Ezra 7.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is in Ezra 7:1 that we are finally introduced to the book’s namesake. We learn that Ezra “was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given . . . .” (Ezra 7:6) We also learn that the Lord had caused him to have favor with Artaxerxes the king of Persia. (Ezra 7:6)

We are introduced to Ezra as he is leaving for Jerusalem. (Ezra 7:7) We learn that the purpose of Ezra’s trip was to teach the returned remnant of Israel the Law of Moses: “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10) (emphasis added) This is a profoundly significant verse. Schreiner rightly notes: “Ezra is not presented merely as an intellectual. He studied, obeyed, and taught. The order is crucial. Ezra had spent his waking moments studying the word of the Lord not just to learn more about it but, to do it! And, not only did he want to walk in grateful obedience the revealed will of the Lord, he wanted to instruct others so that they could join him in living lives of grateful obedience before the Lord.

The Lord blessed Ezra’s mission with abundance. In Ezra 7:12-24, we see Artaxerxes again declaring that anyone who desired could return to the Promised Land, providing additional resources for the Temple and prohibiting any attempted hindrance of the worship within the Temple. Ezra responded to the Lord’s favor with praise: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty officers.” (Ezra 7:27-28) Encouraged to take on the great task before him, Ezra “took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.” (Ezra 7:28)

Ezra, and additional exiles who made the journey with him, arrived safely in the Promised Land because of the Lord’s protection. (Ezra 8:31-32) Upon their arrival, they offer sacrifices to the Lord and mobilized provisions for the facilitation of the operation of the Temple. (Ezra 8:36)

The story of Ezra, to this point, has been quite positive. However, the positive tone shifts as we enter Ezra 9. Ezra 9 gives us insight into the spiritual state of the remnant that had returned to the Promised Land from exile. At this point of the story, the remnant of Israel had been back in the Promised Land for approximately 80 years.[[9]](#footnote-9) Sadly, that was plenty of time for the joy of the return from exile and the reconstruction of the Temple to wear off and for the people to turn their hearts affections from the Lord.

The people were living in violation of the Law of Moses by intermarrying with the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the context of the Mosaic Covenant, Israel was to obey the Lord so that they could be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:4-6) To be holy is to be separate. Israel was to separate itself from the nations around them.[[11]](#footnote-11) This separation was not based upon the inherent superiority of the nation of Israel but, rather, the weakness of the nation of Israel. If Israel failed to separate themselves from the nations around them, the Lord made clear that a downward progression of rebellion and destruction would take place:

* if Israel *comingled* with the nations around them, they would be drawn to *worship* the gods of those nations;
* if they *worshiped* the gods of those nations, they would no longer be walking in grateful *obedience* to the revealed will of the Lord;
* if they were no longer walking in grateful *obedience* to the Lord, they would be walking in *disobedience*;
* if they walked in *disobedience*, they would experience the *curses* of the covenant rather than the *blessings* of the covenant.

That is, of course, the progression that ultimately ended in Israel and Judah’s exile from the Promised Land. And, this is the progression that will, once again, result in Israel’s experience of the covenant curses, once again. Ezra realizes the path that the returned remnant has chosen and responds with repentance: “As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.” (Ezra 9:3)

Ezra then intercedes on behalf of the remnant, confessing their sin and asking for the Lord’s grace and mercy. Ezra acknowledges that the Lord was perfectly just in causing his people to experience exile because of their rebellion against him. (Ezra 9:6-7) Ezra then acknowledges the amazing grace of the Lord in allowing his people to return to the Promised Land: “But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.” (Ezra 9:8-9)

Ezra then confesses that the remnant has rebelled against the Lord just as their fathers had rebelled by failing to separate themselves from the nations around them. (Ezra 9:10-12) Finally, acknowledges that the remnant’s rebellion merits the same judgment experienced by their fathers but pleads with the Lord to continue to punish the remnant less than their iniquities deserve so that the remnant may be preserved in the Promised Land. (Ezra 9:13-15)

Schreiner rightly summarizes the profound implications of Ezra’s prayer: “Israel’s return from exile is clearly not viewed as the fulfillment of all that the Lord promised for his people. The present state of Israel is ambiguous. On the one hand, they are still viewed as slaves and captives (9:7, 9); on the other hand, the Lord has shown his grace to Israel and give them ‘a little reviving in our slavery’ (9:8). The Lord had been faithful to his covenant promises so that Israel survived as a remnant, so that the temple had been rebuilt and they lived in the land again (9:9). But their old nemesis (their sin!) had arisen, for Israel failed to keep covenant stipulations and flouted the mercy granted to them (9:13). If they failed to act, the remnant could be removed from their midst (9:14-15).”[[12]](#footnote-12)

With this ominous tone, we move into Ezra 10. Thankfully, the remnant of Israel responds to Ezra’s prayer and model of repentance by repenting themselves! While Ezra was praying, the people gathered around him and began to weep because of their sin and rebellion. (Ezra 10:1) Their weeping yielded more than tears, for it also yielded great repentance. The people of Israel, in hope, obediently severed the ties with the nations that they had formed in disobedience.[[13]](#footnote-13) (Ezra 10:2-44)

1. *Where Are We As We Leave Ezra?*

Where are we in the progressive fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises as we begin Ezra?

* *Land* – as the book ends, the remnant has returned to the Promised Land and has been there for some time.
* *Numerous offspring* – the nation has been greatly reduced. We are told in Ezra 2:64 that only 42,360 people returned to the Promised Land in response to Cyrus’s initial decree. More came after that, but Israel has suffered great loss in numbers because of the exile and the failure of many to return to the Promised Land.
* *Worldwide blessing* – the ministry of Ezra brings a ray of hope into the fulfillment of this promise as the people respond to rebuke with repentance and separate themselves from the nations around them. Perhaps they can now be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to mediate the presence/blessing of the Lord to the nations. However, we no longer have a Davidic King reigning over Israel. And, we know from the Davidic Covenant that the ultimate fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises will be brought about by a son of David who will be an eternal king over an eternal kingdom. While a remnant is in the Promised Land, and the Temple has been rebuilt, the kingdom is not present without a Davidic King and the glory of the Lord did not descend upon the Temple upon its completion as we saw in Exodus 40 and 1 Kings 8.

1. **Nehemiah** (13 chapters - takes about 1 hour to read for the average person)
   1. *Placement on the Storyline*?

We learn in Nehemiah 2:1, that the bulk of story occurs after “the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.” The reign of King Artaxerxes is commonly dated from 464 to 423 B.C.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, story of Nehemiah started around 444 B.C. This means that the remnant had been back in the Promised Land for approximately the remnant that had returned from the exile to the Promised Land had been there for approximately 94 years and approximately 14 years had passed since the events recorded in Ezra had taken place.

This means that the story picks up in Nehemiah right where we left off as we left the book of Ezra:

* *Land* – as the book ends, the remnant has returned to the Promised Land and has been there for some time.
* *Numerous offspring* – the nation has been greatly reduced. We are told in Ezra 2:64 that only 42,360 people returned to the Promised Land in response to Cyrus’s initial decree. More came after that, but Israel has suffered great loss in numbers because of the exile and the failure of many to return to the Promised Land.
* *Worldwide blessing* – the ministry of Ezra brings a ray of hope into the fulfillment of this promise as the people respond to rebuke with repentance and separate themselves from the nations around them. Perhaps they can now be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to mediate the presence/blessing of the Lord to the nations. However, we no longer have a Davidic King reigning over Israel. And, we know from the Davidic Covenant that the ultimate fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises will be brought about by a son of David who will be an eternal king over an eternal kingdom. While a remnant is in the Promised Land, and the Temple has been rebuilt, the kingdom is not present without a Davidic King and glory did not descend upon the temple.
  1. *Nehemiah Returns & Rebuilding Begins (Nehemiah 1-4)*

The book of Ezra ended on a positive note. The remnant of Israel responded to Ezra’s rebuke of their sin with repentance and separated themselves from the nations. But, as we begin the book of Nehemiah we learn that not all is well with the state of the remnant that had returned. A report comes back to Nehemiah that “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” (Nehemiah 1:3)

Nehemiah understands that the trouble experienced by the remnant of Israel in the Promised Land is a result of their rebellion against the Lord. When he hears the report he weeps, mourns, fasts, prays, and confesses the sins of the people of Israel: “We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.” (Nehemiah 1:7) He then intercedes for Israel based upon the Lord’s promises. In Nehemiah 1:8-9, he recalls the Lord’s promise that we saw in several places throughout the Pentateuch that the people would rebel, be exiled, and then return to the Promised Land when they return to the Lord.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Nehemiah then basis his intercession for those that the Lord has brought back to the Promised Land from the exile on the Lord’s faithfulness and reputation that is tied to the fate of the returned remnant: “They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.” (Nehemiah 1:10) We have seen this type of prayer several times in the story to this point. The leaders who intercede on behalf of the people frequently base their intercession on the fact that the Lord’s glory, faithfulness, and reputation is based upon the future fate of the people of Israel because he is started a work in them and will be glorified to a greater extent if that work is completed.

As we leave Nehemiah 1, we learn an important fact that Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes’ cupbearer. Like Ezra, he had the ear of Artaxerxes. You can’t help but see the Lord’s sovereignty at work in placing such great men of faith near the ear of the most significant human leader in relation to the fate of the Lord’s covenant people!

Nehemiah updates the king on the sad state of the remnant that had returned to the Promised Land and asks that he be sent to rebuild Jerusalem and that king Artaxerxes provide him with the resources necessary to complete such construction. (Nehemiah 2:1-8) Quite amazingly, the king grants his request because “the good hand of my God was upon me.” (Nehemiah 2:8)

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and inspected the city’s walls that had been destroyed. (Nehemiah 2:9-16) After assessing what needed to be done, Nehemiah calls the people to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 2:17) The people initially responded favorably and said, “Let us rise up and build.” (Nehemiah 2:18) But, then opposition hits. The people are accused of rebelling against the king. (Nehemiah 2:19) But, Nehemiah rebukes the opposition and the work continues. (Nehemiah 2:20)

Nehemiah 3 provides an account of the systematic rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. It is a very encouraging and positive chapter as, bit by bit, the wall begins to gain substance. But, the battle with the line of rebellion flares up again in Nehemiah 4 as opposition comes once again to the wall’s reconstruction. The line of rebellion tried to discourage the people by taunting them in Nehemiah 4:1-3 and laughing at Israel’s inability to complete the task of rebuilding the walls.

Nehemiah, the representative of the line of restoration, intercedes for the people and asks the Lord to “[t]urn back their taunt on their own heads.” (Nehemiah 4:5) Nehemiah understands the lesson that we learned through Hannah’s hymn; namely, that the Lord will humble the proud and raise up the humble.[[16]](#footnote-16) And, as in the book of 1-2 Samuel, the truth of Hannah’s hymn rings true in Nehemiah. Despite the taunts of the line of rebellion, the wall continued to be rebuilt: “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.” (Nehemiah 4:6)

The line of rebellion once again mounts its attack in Nehemiah 4:7-8 and plotted to “fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.” But, again, the humble remnant “prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.” (Nehemiah 4:9) Nehemiah, at the helm, encouraged the people to continue the work in the courage and strength of the Lord: “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” (Nehemiah 4:14) The Lord frustrated the plans of the line of rebellion and the remnant of Israel was divided into two parties from that point forward. (Nehemiah 4:15-16) One party was set on doing the work of rebuilding and the other was set on protecting those who were rebuilding. The remnant looked like the line of restoration here, humbly trusting in the Lord’s protection from their enemies.

* 1. *The Remnant Rebels & Repents (Nehemiah 5)*

Nehemiah 5 provides yet another account of the remnant’s rebellion against the Lord. As Schreiner notes: “Israel’s primary problem was not the opposition of its enemies; rather, it was their own lack of devotion and commitment to Yahweh . . . .”[[17]](#footnote-17) This lack of devotion and commitment to the Lord is seen in the leaders of Israel taking advantage of the weak and the poor in Israel. This is in direct violation of the requirements of the Law of Moses and the consequences of the leaders’ sinful behavior was devastating. Schreiner notes that: “The people were struggling to make it financially and were suffering from a lack of food.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The struggle was so intense that the common people of Israel had to mortgage their property and sell their children into slavery just to have enough food to eat. (Nehemiah 5:3-5)

Nehemiah, as the representative of the line of restoration, called the leaders to repentance and to make the people whole whom they had wronged. The leaders responded in repentance and made restitution for their wrongs against the common people in Israel. (Nehemiah 5:12-13) The people are again looking like the line of restoration.

* 1. *The Wall Is Finished Despite Continued Opposition (Nehemiah 6-7)*

Though the people of Israel once again resembled the line of restoration, the line of rebellion continued to strive against them and attempt to prevent the rebuilding of the wall. (Nehemiah 6:1-14) But, in Nehemiah 6:15 we learn that the wall was finished! The Lord had graciously given victory to the line restoration and the line of rebellion felt the sting of defeat: “[W]hen 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.” (Nehemiah 6:16)

After the completion of Jerusalem’s wall, our attention is immediately pointed to the fact that the number of Israel has been greatly reduced and only a remnant remains: “The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been built.” (Nehemiah 7:4) The total number of Israel given at the end of the genealogy in Nehemiah 7:66 is the exact same number given in Ezra 2:64 – 42,360.[[19]](#footnote-19)

* 1. *Ezra’s Revival (8-10)*

As we enter Nehemiah 8, we are reacquainted with our friend Ezra. Recall that “Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10) We see him living out his life purpose in Nehemiah 8 as the returned remnant gathered and asked Ezra to read the Law of Moses to them. (Nehemiah 8:1) Ezra read the Law of Moses to the people and others helped the people understand what was being read to them. (Nehemiah 8:2-8) As the people began to understand what was being read to them they, understandably, began to weep. (Nehemiah 8:9) That is the proper response when the grace, greatness, and beauty of the Lord is made clear to you in equal measure with your rebellion against his grace, greatness, and beauty and the just consequences that are promised to flow from such rebellion.

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites saw the repentance of the people and, in response, encouraged them to celebrate the Lord’s grace, greatness, and beauty rather than to wallow in their guilt and shame: “Go you way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10) The people didn’t need to be told a second time to celebrate the Lord’s goodness instead of grieve over their sin, so “all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” (Nehemiah 8:12)

Sally Lloyd-Jones summarizes the scene like this: “[God’s people] had forgotten how God wanted them to live, or who they were supposed to be. So Ezra and Nehemiah read them the rules God had given Moses. But something odd happened: the more the sermon went on, the sadder they got. Why? Was the sermon boring? No, not really. It was strange, you see. As Ezra read the book of rules, it worked like a mirror. It showed them what they were like, and they didn’t like what they saw. They saw that they had not been living the way they should. They saw that they were cruel and selfish. ‘We’ve blown it,’ they cried. ‘How God will punish us!’ . . . . Ezra looked at God’s children. Great, hot tears were welling up in their eyes and streaming down their cheeks. He stopped his sermon – mid-sentence – and shut the book. ‘We’re having a party!” he shouted. And so that’s just what they did! All week long.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The people, through hearing the Law of Moses read, learned that they were required to celebrate the Feast of Booths. So, they celebrated the Feast of Booths with great rejoicing. (Nehemiah 8:13-18)

As we leave Nehemiah 8 and enter Nehemiah 9, the mood of the people turns from one of rejoicing to one of repentance. For, returning to the Lord was not only accomplished by rejoicing in his infinite grace and beauty, but also by repenting of their sins. The people, once again, read the Law of Moses for a quarter of the day, confessed their sins for a quarter of the day, and then rose up and worshiped the Lord. (Nehemiah 9:1-5) The Levites instructed the people to “Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.” (Nehemiah 9:5)

As we saw back in Exodus 15, the proper model of worship is praising the Lord for who he is and what he has done. As the remnant of Israel worships the Lord in Nehemiah 9:6-31, they recount his great acts and praise him for them:

* He made heaven and earth and everything within them;
* He preserves everything that he has made;
* He chose Abram, gave him the name Abraham and entered into a covenant with him;
* He has been faithful to his covenant with Abraham;
* He delivered his people from slavery in Egypt with great signs and wonders and divided the Red Sea on their behalf;
* He provided for, and led, his people as they wandered through the wilderness;
* He graciously gave his people his laws through Moses;
* He instructed his people to go into the land that he had promised to give them;
* But, his people rebelled and failed to go into the land;
* But, he was “ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake” his people;
* He fulfilled his promise of land and gave them possession of the promised land;
* He fulfilled his promise of numerous offspring and made Israel as numerous “as the stars of heaven”;
* His people then once again rebelled rather than worshiped in response to his goodness and faithfulness;
* He repeatedly sent judges to save his people in their cycle of rebellion, judgment, repentance, restoration;
* He, through all this, in his great mercy “did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”

It is on the basis of the Lord’s past faithfulness that the people make their petition for the Lord to act in accordance with his covenant faithfulness and love toward them. (Nehemiah 9:32-37) The people also make a covenant before the Lord to walk in obedience to his revealed will. (Nehemiah 9:38-10:39) Schreiner provides the reminder, that the call to grateful obedience is not a call to legalism, but rather a call to worship: “The heart and soul of what Nehemiah was calling for was praise and honor and glory to Yahweh through the obedience of the people.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

* 1. *The Wall is Dedicated (11-13:3)*

The wall that was completed in Nehemiah 6:15 is dedicated in Nehemiah 12:27-43 with celebration, gladness, thanksgiving, and singing and the playing of musical instruments, and sacrifices “for God had made them rejoice with great joy.” This is a high point in the story for a remnant is back in the land living in grateful obedience to the revealed will of the Lord and enjoying the blessing and joy of his presence!

* 1. *The Remnant Rebels and Repents (Again) (13:4-31)*

The high point captured by the previous chapters is brought back down to earth with the rebellion of Eliashib the priest and the remnant in general. Nehemiah had been absent from the remnant for a time and during this time things had regressed quite significantly. Eliashib had repurposed a portion of the Temple from the storage of the grain offering to the dwelling place of one of the members of the line of rebellion! (Nehemiah 13:4-5) Nehemiah remedied the rebellion when he heard about it and sent the line of rebellion packing! (Nehemiah 13:7-9)

The people had further rebelled by:

* failing to provide for the Levites (Nehemiah 13:10);
* violating the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-18);
* intermarrying with the nations around them (Nehemiah 13:23-27); and
* desecrated the priesthood (Nehemiah 13:28-29)

Nehemiah also put an end to all of this this rebellion and “cleansed them from everything foreign, and . . . established the duties of the priests and the Levites, each in his work; and . . . provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.” (Nehemiah 13:30-31) But, the message is clear, if Nehemiah went away again, the people would turn and rebel against their Lord. There still was no king in the Land and the tragic cycle of rebellion, judgment, repentance, restoration repeatedly set forth in the book of Judges doesn’t seem far away at all.

* 1. Where Are We As We Leave Nehemiah?

Where are we in the story of the Old Testament as we leave the book of Nehemiah?

* *Land* – as the book ends, the remnant is still in the Promised Land and has been there for some time.
* *Numerous offspring* – the nation has been greatly reduced. We are told again in Nehemiah 7:66 that only 42,360 people are dwelling in the Promised Land after the return from exile.
* *Worldwide blessing* – Nehemiah’s leadership resulted in the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls and Ezra’s ministry of the Law of Moses brought the people to a place of worship and repentance. However, there is still no Davidic king reigning over the people of Israel and, so we are signaled that the remnants return to the Promised Land is not the ultimate fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises. We don’t have an eternal king over an eternal kingdom. Further, the rebellion of the people that concludes the book of Nehemiah makes it clear that the people still have a significant heart problem that prevents them from living lives of grateful obedience to the Lord’s revealed will. Though the Temple has been rebuilt, it didn’t even measure up to the original Temple constructed during Solomon’s reign and the glory of the Lord didn’t descend upon it when completed. Though the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, there was no king reigning there and the hearts of the people were still not able to obey the Lord. In other words, the return to the Promised Land after the exile did not bring about the promised restoration and fulfillment that was anticipated. There was still a greater restoration and greater fulfillment to come. In a very real sense, “The exile continues even though Israel is in the land.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This is sadly similar to the reality that we saw in the book of Judges where the people were “in the Land but not in the Lord.[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. **Esther** (10 chapters – takes about ½ an hour to read for the average person)
   1. *Placement on the Storyline?*

Where are we in the progressive fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises as we begin the book of Esther? We learn in Esther 1:1 that the story is set “in the days of Ahasuerus.” King Ahasuerus reigned from 486-464 B.C. and was the king who reigned directly before King Artaxerxes (the king who reigned during the life and ministry of both Ezra and Nehemiah).[[24]](#footnote-24) As we noted previously, Cyrus’ initial decree which ended the exile was issued in 538 B.C. So, the remnant who returned in response to Cyrus’ initial decree had been in the Promised Land for approximately 52 years when King Ahasuerus became king. So, the story of Esther is properly understood to be after the official end of the exile and before the life and ministry of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

Where does that place us in the progressive fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises?

* *Land* – as the book begins, the remnant has returned from exile and have been living in the Promised Land for at least 52 years.
* *Numerous offspring* – given that the number of those who returned from the exile is set at 42,360 before the story of Esther (Ezra 2:64) and after the story of Esther (Nehemiah 7:4), it is safe to assume that the number of Israel that had returned from the exile is around that same number.
* *Worldwide blessing* – the people have returned to the Promised Land but there is no Davidic King reigning there, the Temple had not yet been built under the ministry of Ezra, and the walls of Jerusalem had not been built under the ministry of Nehemiah. Thus, worldwide blessing still seemed a bit out of reach at this point in the story.
  1. *The Lord’s Promises Remain for Israel (1-10)*

The story of Esther begins in the context of the royal court of King Ahasuerus. This is somewhat of an unexpected context. The remnant has already returned to the Promised Land and one would think that the story would be set there, like the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The different setting is a good reminder that the Lord’s reign and work is not limited to the people of Israel – he is the king of the universe!

Esther 1 tells the story of how Queen Vashti was removed from her position, thus creating a vacancy that would eventually be filled by none other than Esther, a Jew. The point of the story recounted by Esther 1 “is that God was secretly and unobtrusively working in human affairs, for . . . the pathway was opened for Esther to replace Vashti . . . [putting her] in a position to advocate for the Jews at the crucial hour.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Esther 2 tells the story of how Esther came to be queen and introduces Mordecai, her uncle. Esther 2 also tells the significant portion of the story where Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king and given credit for the discovery of the plot. At the end of Esther 2, the Lord has placed a Jew as the king’s wife and as the one credited with saving the king’s life. Two incredibly important and strategic placements for the storm that looms in the horizon!

The conflict between the line of restoration (represented by Esther and Mordecai) and the line of rebellion (represented by Haman) comes to a head in Esther 3. The king had commanded that the people bow to Haman, one of his high-ranking officials. But, Mordecai refused to do so. While we are not explicitly told the reason for Mordecai’s refusal to bow, we can surmise “that bowing to Haman would violate his devotion to Yahweh as the God of Israel. The Lord was Mordecai’s king and sovereign, not Haman.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Haman learned of Mordecai’s refusal and that he was a Jew. In his anger, Haman sought to destroy the Jewish people because of Mordecai’s refusal. Haman’s plot takes us back to the Genesis account for it identifies Haman as “[t]he offspring of the serpent [who attempts] to destroy and wipe out the offspring of the woman.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Genesis 12:1-3 also gives us a hint as to Haman’s ultimate end for the Lord promised to bless those who bless the descendants of Abraham and the curse those who curse the descendants of Abraham.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Haman advanced his evil plot by persuading the king of issue a decree ordering the mass slaughter of the Jewish people. Understandably, the capital “city of Susa was thrown into confusion” because of the king’s decree. (Esther 3:15) Mordecai tore his clothes and went into great mourning with many other Jews when he heard the king’s devastating decree. (Esther 4:1-3)

Mordecai instructed Esther “to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people.” (Esther 4:8) Esther’s first response is understandable. She cites the law of the land that anyone who approaches the king without being summoned is put to death. (Esther 4:11) Mordecai famously rebukes Esther in Esther 4:13-4: “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Schreiner notes: “The hidden sovereignty o the Lord creeps into the story again, for Mordecai suggested that Esther was appointed as queen ‘for such a time as this’ (4:13). And if she did not act, then ‘relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place’ (4:14).”[[29]](#footnote-29)

With the stakes clearly set before her and a new perspective on her rise to the throne in light of the Lord’s sovereignty at the front of her mind, Esther agrees to go before the king. However, she calls Mordecai to mobilize a three-day fast so that she would have success before the king. (Esther 4:16) After the fast, Esther famously says: “I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:16)

Esther went into the king on the third day of the fast and “won favor in his sight.” (Esther 5:2) The king invites Esther to present her request and Esther asks that the king and Haman come to a feast that she had prepared for them. (Esther 5:4) The king and Haman go to the feast and rather than presenting her request to the king, Esther asks that the king and Haman come to yet another feast that she has prepared for them the following day. (Esther 5:8) As Schreiner notes: “The delay proves to be decisive for the outcome of the story, confirming the Lord’s providence in all that happens.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

During the delay, Haman had gallows made for the purpose of hanging Mordecai (Esther 5:14) and the king planned on honoring Mordecai because he was reminded of the fact that Mordecai had saved his life. (Esther 6:1-3) Just as the king was thinking of how he would reward Mordecai, Haman was approaching the king to ask him to put Mordecai to death. (Esther 6:4-5) As Haman came before the king, the king asked him “What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” (Esther 6:6) Thinking that the king sought to honor him, Haman told the king that he should have the man dressed in royal dress and led by one of the king’s officials repeatedly saying “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” (Esther 6:6-10)

Haman’s suggestion pleases the king and Haman is ordered to dress Mordecai in royal dress and lead him through the city proclaiming the kings blessing upon him. (Esther 6:10) Haman carried out the king’s orders in shame and then went home “mourning and with his head covered.” (Esther 6:11-12) When he recounted what had happened to his wife and counselors, they correctly assessed the situation: “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.” (Esther 6:13) And, this is exactly what happens as the story progresses.

As Haman’s end was being predicted by his wife and counselors, he is taken to the feast that Esther had prepared. During the feast, Esther finally makes her request to the king; namely, that her life, and the life of her people, be spared. The king, outraged that a death sentence had been placed upon her and her people, asked who had caused such a thing to happen. Esther then pointed the finger to Haman and the king left in his anger. (Esther 6:14-7:7) When the king’s anger had subsided he returned only to find Haman apparently assaulting Esther. (Esther 7:8) That was the end of Haman, for he was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. (Esther 7:8-10)

The truths of Hannah’s hymn in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 again come to the forefront of the story: The Lord will humble the proud and exalt the humble! Haman was hung on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai and Mordecai was given the honor that had previously been granted to Haman. (Esther 8:1-2) The king then authorized Mordecai to send an order revoking the previous order to wipe out the Jewish people and Mordecai did so. (Esther 8:7-14)

The sorrow of the Jewish people was turned to joy as the news of their deliverance spread to them: “The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. (Esther 8:16-17) Further, rather than judgment being executed upon the Jews, the Jews were the instrument of judgment upon those who wished to do the Jews harm. (Esther 9:1-19) Mordecai and Esther ordered the Jewish people to commemorate the Lord’s great deliverance each year through the feast of Purim. (Ezra 9:20-32)

The book ends with the two Jewish people in the story being elevated to two extremely high positions in the Persian Empire – Queen and Second-in-Command. The last verses of the book clearly set forth Mordecai’s exalted position: “For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.” (Ezra 10:3) The fact that Esther and Mordecai enjoyed such high positions within the Persian empire under the reign of King Ahasuerus does help explain how both Ezra and Nehemiah also are raised to such high positions within the Persian Empire, as well!

Schreiner summarizes the message of the book well: “The message of Esther is not difficult to understand. Even though God is never mentioned, Yahweh is King, and the Jews are his people. No plot to annihilate them will ever succeed, for Yahweh made a covenant with Israel and will fulfill his promises to them. The serpent and his offspring will not perish from the earth until the final victory is won, but they will not ultimately triumph. The kingdom will come in its fullness. The whole world will experience the blessing promised to Abraham.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

As the book of Ruth provided a ray of hope in the midst of the disappointment surrounding the period of the judges, so Esther provides a ray of hope in the midst of the disappointment surrounding the realization that the return from exile is not going to bring about the promised restoration and fulfillment, as made clear in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Lord will preserve the line of restoration and ultimately fulfill his restorative promises through them. No matter how dark and discouraging the present experience of the line of restoration may appear with our limited understanding, the Lord will accomplish his purposes and fulfill his promises!

* 1. *Where Are We As We Leave Esther?*

Where are we in the progressive fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive promises as we leave the book of Esther?

* *Land* – the remnant is still in the Promised Land having returned from exile.
* *Numerous offspring* – given that the number of those who returned from the exile is set at 42,360 before the story of Esther (Ezra 2:64) and after the story of Esther (Nehemiah 7:4), it is safe to assume that the number of Israel that had returned from the exile is around that same number.
* *Worldwide blessing* – the people have returned to the Promised Land but there is no Davidic King reigning there, the Temple had not yet been built under the ministry of Ezra, and the walls of Jerusalem had not been built under the ministry of Nehemiah. Thus, worldwide blessing still seemed a bit out of reach at this point in the story. However, the Queen of the Persian Empire which rules over the remnant in the Promised Land is Jewish, as well as the second-in-command in the Persian Empire. So, we can discern that the Lord is still actively working to fulfill his restorative promises in and through the nation of Israel!

1. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 539 B.C., the Medo-Persian empire conquered Babylon. The first year following the fall of Babylon, Cyrus made is significant proclamation. Goldsworthy, According to Plan, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Israel will be used to refer both to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Sailhamer notes that the group that returned from exile included “among them a remnant of the original ‘Israel” that occupied the northern kingdom. The return is pictured as a comprehensive return of God’s people.” Sailhamer, NIV Compact Commentary, 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 211. Ezra 6:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cyrus’s decree can be dated to 538 B.C. and the reign of Artaxerxes can be dated to 464-423 B.C. It is believed that Ezra’s trip to the Promised Land recorded in Ezra 7 occurred in 458 B.C., approximately 80 years after the original decree by Cyrus. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 210, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., Exodus 34:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Leviticus made clear that part of that obedience was compliance with extensive purity regulations. Lev. 11-15. As we previously noted, a helpful understanding of the underlying purpose of these purity regulations is assuring the separation of the people of Israel from the nations around them. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Schreiner, the King in His Beauty, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, e.g., Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 4, Deuteronomy 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 1 Samuel 2:1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Interesting, the exact same number of servants (7,337), horses (736), mules (245), camels (435), and donkeys (6,720) is given in the totals set forth in Ezra and Nehemiah. The only difference is the number of singers – Ezra sets forth 200 and Nehemiah sets forth 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sally Loyd-Jones, The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 170-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 219 (quoting Dempster, Dominion and Dynasty, 224). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Schreiner, The King in His Beauty, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)