



Class 13 - Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah

Old Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

1st & 2nd Chronicles

Think of a wedding where you watch a slideshow of pictures that tell a person's story from birth. What do you get out of them? Well, more than just some cute baby pictures. They highlight what that person has tried to do with her life. And that's a good analogy for our study this morning. We've been following the development of God's plan of redemption through the Old Testament all the way up to Judah's exile into Babylon. Last week, in the book of Daniel, we saw the prophet Daniel rejoicing that the end of the exile was near. Today, we arrive at a book that was written after the exile, when the people had returned to Jerusalem. And this book, the book of Chronicles, functions like a giant slideshow of the whole Old Testament. Reaching all the way back to Adam and focusing especially on the monarchy, Chronicles is a deliberate retelling of the people's history. It's a grand retrospective, to help them make sense of who they are now that the exile's over. Let's pray, and then we'll begin.

[PRAY]

Context

Like Samuel and Kings, first and second Chronicles were originally one book, and that's how we'll treat them today. The Hebrew name for the book translates to "the events of the days" – it's a historical record. One of the early church fathers, Jerome, called it the "chronicle" of Judah's history when he translated the Bible into Latin, and title stuck. We don't know who the actual chronicler was who assembled this book. Some suggest Ezra, the priest we'll study in just a few minutes week.

Regardless of who the author was, the historical context of when he wrote helps us understand why he wrote. To get a sense of this context, let's turn to 1 Chron. 9:1-2, starting in the second half of verse 1:

“And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith. Now

the first to dwell again in their possessions in their cities were Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the temple servants.”

So are we during or after the exile? [After] Right! After seventy years, they’re back!

And this fact is key to appreciating the message of the book of Chronicles. As you remember, the history of Israel was one of hope and tragedy. Hope in God’s promise that one of David’s sons would rule forever. But tragedy as king after king failed to live up to God’s righteous. Tragedy seemed to win as the northern tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria in 722 BC, never to return. And as the southern kingdom of Judah was defeated by Babylon in 586 BC. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people exiled. But hope wasn’t crushed completely; a remnant was preserved in Babylon, and David’s line survived through king Jehoiachin. Ezra and Nehemiah, which we’ll study later this morning, complete the story by showing us what happened when the people finally returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city walls.

What are some similarities between these people and our situation as Christians today?

[one key similarity: we both live in the middle of the “already, not yet” fulfillment of God’s promises.]

Purpose of Chronicles

That’s all context. But before we dive into Chronicles, we need to answer an important question that gets to the purpose of Chronicles. Why does the author retell a history that’s already been told once in the Old Testament. After all, much of Chronicles overlaps with the books of 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The answer is that Chronicles was compiled with a different theological purpose. Kings was composed *during* the exile, so its main concern is to show that God didn’t break his promise when he allowed the exile. For the chronicler, though, the exile is over. His aim is to remind the people of faith that God still has a future for them. So he leaves out stories that were prominent in Kings, and features content that Kings lacks. He’s got a different end in mind.

So what’s his purpose? Well, whereas Kings is about why the people had to go into exile, Chronicles is about where their hope is to be now that they’re back. Put yourself in their shoes for a moment. You’re part of this community that’s returned to Jerusalem. You’ve got some big questions to answer, don’t you? Like, “Is God’s promise of a Messiah still valid? Are we still his covenant people? Does God still care about us?” The chronicler’s purpose in retelling their history is to answer those questions. Like a wedding slideshow, he’s carefully picked out a few photos (that is, historical vignettes) to show them who they are now that they’re back in the

land.

You see, things weren't exactly as they expected them to be. Remember back to Daniel chapter 9 last week. The seventy years are over – and so the exiles are returning. But the seventy weeks have just begun – the seventy “sevens” that must pass until the Lord’s Anointed One – the Messiah – begins his rule. And so while the physical exile is over, the spiritual exile continues. That’s why when the people return to Jerusalem, they’re not yet enjoying all the new covenant promises that we read of in places like Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 37. Chronicles is written telling the people that they are not to place their ultimate hope in their return to the land, but in God’s greater fulfillment of promises that’s yet to come.

Well then, how does this work out in Chronicles? Let’s dive in and find out.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

1 Chronicles 1-9 – Genealogies: The Roots of the Postexilic Community

Turn with me to 1 Chronicles 1:1-4. “Adam, Seth, Enosh; Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared; Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech; Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.” If you allow your eyes to drift, you’ll notice that the lists of names goes on for quite a long time – 9 chapters to be exact. Now, to modern sensibilities, such genealogies may seem irrelevant. The prospect of ending up in 1 Chronicles during your personal devotions might not seem too thrilling!

But if we remember the context, we’ll see how fundamental these genealogies are to the chronicler’s purpose. He’s demonstrating that the postexilic community are God’s chosen people – just like these saints of old! That comes across in how the genealogies are structured. You see there in 1:1 that the chronicler starts all the way at the beginning of time, with Adam. And as he progresses through history, the chronicler always zeroes in on the line of promise. You see in chapter 1, verses 5-16, he briefly mentions the two descendants of Noah who are not ancestors of Abraham. But in verse 17 the account shifts to the line of Shem, Noah’s son who does lead to Abraham. The same thing happens with Abraham’s sons. The line of Ishmael only goes for one generation. But then he focuses in on the line of Isaac beginning in 1:34.

Now, look at 2:1-2. Here we see the twelve sons of Israel. Interestingly, the record starts with Judah, instead of the oldest son, Reuben. Why? Because through Judah’s line we watch for the coming king David, and beyond David, the Messiah. David appears in 2:15, and if you look over to chapter 3 you’ll see the list of David’s sons. Amazingly, David’s royal lineage is traced *all the way through to the other side of the exile*. Verse 19 mentions a man named Zerubbabel

who is the Davidic descendant governing Jerusalem *after* the return from exile. It's as through the chronicler really can't wait to the end of the book to say, "Look! We're back from exile and Yahweh's promises are still intact!"

Moving ahead, Chapters 4-8 contain the genealogies of some more of Jacob's sons. The point here is to show what happened to the North because of their unfaithfulness. Unlike those who returned to Jerusalem, the northern tribes of Israel were lost in exile. Still, turn to 1 Chr. 9:1. There you see the summary statement, "So all Israel was recorded in genealogies, and these are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel." That phrase, "All Israel," is one that the chronicler repeats a dozens of times throughout the book. Yes, he's mainly concerned with Judah. But his inclusion of most of the northern tribes here and his emphasis on "all Israel" tells us something. It tells us that the spiritual core of the people isn't found in the national identity of the southern kingdom, but in the promises that Yahweh made to David. Those promises are for anyone in Judah or Israel who would repent and believe.

One final point on these genealogies. Because this is a unique genre of literature in scripture, it often gets misinterpreted. For example, folks might argue that if you pray the same prayer Jabez prayed in 1 Chr. 4:9, you'll get blessed the same way he did. Beware this kind of interpretation. For one, it brushes aside the differences between the ways God worked in the nation of Israel and the ways he works in his church today. And second, that interpretation brushes past the author's main intent in including the material. The main point here is that the people are still connected to God's promises and that David's line is still intact. To be valid, any secondary point will have to line up with that main point.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

1 Chronicles 10-2 Chronicles 9 – The United Monarchy: The Messianic Hope of the Postexilic Community

The next major section covers the united monarchy under David and Solomon. If you turn to 1 Chr. 17:11-13, you'll see the reason why David in particular features so prominently in the book. God says to David, "When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." In this passage, God makes a covenant with David. Yes, one of David's sons will build a "house," a temple for God – but God himself will build a "house" for David – a dynasty

from which will come an eternal king. You'll remember that from 2 Samuel.

It's this promise that the chronicler wants to impress on his readers. We can see how he does that through two important ways his account differs from the account of David and Solomon in Samuel and Kings.

- 1) The first way difference: unlike Samuel and Kings, **Chronicles presents a vision of what the Messiah will be like by highlighting the positive aspects of David and Solomon.**

To see one example of what I mean, turn back quickly to 2 Samuel 11:1-2: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful."

Well, you may know where that story ends up: with David committing adultery and even murder. 2 Samuel reminds us that David was far from perfect.

But now, turn over to 1 Chron. 20:1-2: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, Joab led out the army and ravaged the country of the Ammonites and came and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. And Joab struck down Rabbah and overthrew it. And David took the crown of their king from his head. He found that it weighed a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone. And it was placed on David's head."

Whoa! Talk about whitewashing history! Nothing at all about adultery and murder. In Samuel, David's exposed as a sinner. In Chronicles, he's wearing a crown of victory! This is one instance of many in Chronicles where David's described as the king *par excellence*. Was the chronicler trying to cover up the facts? Not at all: David's sins had been recorded in Samuel precisely so the people wouldn't forget them.¹ But the chronicler has a different agenda. By portraying David in an overwhelmingly positive light, he's painting a picture of the sort of king the postexilic people were to hope for.

It's the same thing when we get to Solomon: his sin of idolatry, which you can read about in 1 Kings 11, is notably absent in Chronicles. The chronicler describes these two kings of the past in such a way as to give a preview of *the* King of the future.

For us today, we can marvel at how the history of David and Solomon teach us so much about

¹It's also worth noting that the chronicler does include David's error of counting the troops against God's will in chapter 21.

Jesus. Jesus is the King who rules in justice; Jesus is the warrior who brings us victory over sin, Satan, and death; Jesus is the shepherd of our hearts who leads us to worship and pray to God; Jesus is the owner of all wealth, riches, and splendor; Jesus is the supreme wisdom of God. Read of David and Solomon in this book, and delight in how they foreshadow the greatest King of all.

- 2) The second thing to note in this section: unlike in Kings, **in Chronicles, the accounts of David and Solomon revolve around the temple of God.**

In 1 Kings (5:7), Hiram, king of Tyre, praises God for Solomon's wisdom. "Blessed be the Lord this day, who has given to David a wise son to be over this great people." In Chronicles (2 Ch 2:12), Hiram is again quoted: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, who has discretion and understanding, who will build a temple for the Lord and a royal palace for himself." In Kings, wisdom is for ruling; in Chronicles it's for building. So as you read this section, you can't help but notice how much attention the temple receives. If you just scan with your finger along 1 Chr. 22-26, you see the amount of space given to David's preparations for the temple Solomon would build. From the organization of the priests to the assignments of the musicians and gatekeepers. And that continues into 2 Chronicles.

Why this focus? It's not to get the people to hope in a mere building; after all, Solomon's prayer in 2 Chron. 6 admits that God doesn't need a physical place to dwell. No, all this attention to the temple reminds us that in order to enjoy a reconciled relationship with God, the returning exiles must respond to God in repentance and faith. *The chronicler focuses on the temple because the temple, where the atonement sacrifices were made, represents God's willingness to forgive all who seek him with repentant hearts.* Listen to 2 Chron. 6:24-25: "If your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you, and they turn again and acknowledge your name and pray and plead with you in this house, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them again to the land that you gave to them and to their fathers." To approach God at the temple was to approach him humbly, pleading for forgiveness. And that is the approach to God these returning exiles needed.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

2 Chronicles 10-36 – The Kings of Judah: Examples of Rebellion and Repentance

The rest of Chronicles gives a record of the kings of Judah, presenting the nation's descent into sin, division, and finally exile. To understand the significance of this final section of the story,

we need to look at a crucial passage: 2 Chr. 7:13-15. Do you remember how we used Solomon's prayer dedicating the temple in 1 Kings as a kind of "rosetta stone" to discern the entire topography and meaning of Kings? We can do the same with Chronicles – specifically, by looking at what's been added in. Solomon has just dedicated the temple to God, and now God appears to Solomon – and speaks. This happens in Kings too, but the chronicler includes something God says that's absent from Kings. As we've seen already, this is a good sign that the chronicler is highlighting something special.

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place."

So Solomon's prayer in Kings highlights that the downfall of the nation is merely the working out of the Deuteronomy curses (with hope in God's mercy). But God's words here in the corresponding section of Chronicles show a focus on this plea for repentance. In that sense, verse 14 there is really a theme verse for the whole book. Chapters 10-36 cover 19 different kings, from Rehoboam to Zedekiah. All of them are evaluated by how they live up to that verse. Do they humbly seek God and turn from sin? Or do they stubbornly rebel, serve idols, and nurse their pride? This verse establishes an important concept that the chronicler wanted to communicate to the postexilic community. It's the idea of *immediate retribution*. You might imagine, since so many generations were sinful and wicked before the people went into exile, these returning exiles might think: "we can do whatever we want, and God won't punish us right away!" That complacency was a real danger. But the chronicler fights against this mindset. Throughout this section, he points out how when the kings and people sinned, they experienced the consequences of their sin right then, in their own generation. But when the kings and people obeyed and sought God like this verse instructs them to, he "heard from heaven," "forgave their sin," and "healed their land."

Now, 7:14 is an important verse for Chronicles, but I should note that it's also a terribly misapplied verse today. It's a verse given to God's national people, Israel, the people who were set aside by God to display his character and give birth to his Messiah. You may hear folks apply this verse to the nation of America, but that misapplication rips this verse – painfully!! – out of its original context. America is not the chosen land of God – it carries none of the redemptive-historical significance that the ancient land of Israel did. When the Messiah came, God concluded his

work of a special people in a special, physical, land. So, this particular promise to “heal their land” thus no longer applies directly to any place or nation. But the *pattern* of repentance and blessing we see here is one that endures. It instructs us as God’s people to continually turn from our sin and seek the Lord.

Well, having established the principle of immediate retribution that’s so important for Chronicles, let’s look at some examples of this principle at work in this final section.

First, a few positive examples:

1. Look at 17:9-10, where King Jehoshaphat dispatches teachers of God’s Word: “And they taught in Judah, having the Book of the Law of the Lord with them. They went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat.” You see – immediate blessing. The king and people listen to God, and then they enjoy peace.
2. Or consider another good king, king Hezekiah. Near the end of his life, he sins. And look what happens in 32:25-26. “But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for *his heart* was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem. 26 But Hezekiah *humbled himself* for the *pride of his heart*, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.”

But unfortunately, bad outweighs good in Chronicles. Let’s look at some of those examples.

1. First, in 12:1-2: “When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him. 2 In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, *because they had been unfaithful to the Lord*, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem.” You see the pattern: the nation abandons Yahweh, and suffers immediate consequences.
2. Second example: king Amaziah, Chap. 25:27: “From the time when he turned away from the Lord they made a conspiracy against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish. But they sent after him to Lachish and put him to death there.” As soon as he leaves the ways of God, Amaziah is killed by his own people.

The book is full of examples like these – both positive and negative – where each generation is judged for its own behavior.

Well, if we fast-forward to the end of the book, we'll see where this sort of disobedience led. Let's read 2 Chron. 36:15-20: "The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. 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. Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans... [now look at verse 19,] And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword."

But by God's grace, that's not where Chronicles ends. In verses 22-23, God moves a foreign king, Cyrus of Persia, to free the people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. But the principle of immediate retribution still stands. If these people, like their fathers, refuse to seek God, they will reap the bitter fruit of rebellion. And though they're back in the land, their hearts are no better than their ancestors'.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Conclusion

So, at the end of Chronicles, is there no hope for God's people? No: the genealogies show that David's seed is still alive. The focus on the temple reminds the people that God will build his house – the house of David's son. As 2 Chron. 21:7 says, "Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy the house of David, because of the covenant that he had made with David, and since he had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever." So Chronicles leads us directly to Christ, the fulfillment of all God's promises. Jesus is the one who rescues his people from spiritual exile. He is the promised son of David *and* the true temple. And so the end of Chronicles is not a question mark of doubt about the people's future. It's a giant arrow pointing to the King of Kings, the one who "heals the land" of God's people in the most ultimate sense.

Because Chronicles points us to Jesus, it's a wonderfully encouraging read. Here are a few ways we might apply it:

- First, I'd encourage you not to read Chronicles as mere history – but to treasure it as a pointer to the Messiah. We should use Chronicles to bolster our trust in Christ as we see the centuries-old promises he fulfilled.
- Second, as we read Chronicles we sympathize with the postexilic people of God. Just like them, we live in the middle of the "already and not yet," waiting for Christ's return. So

like the Chronicler was instructing these people, our hope shouldn't be in how optimistic our circumstances make us. It doesn't come from earthly rulers or great church leaders. It comes from God's word of promise. Just like them, we need to look back to redemption history so we can have confidence that God will make good on his future promises. ***[if time, flesh this out in discussion]***

- Finally, we should let the chronicler's focus on immediate retribution direct us to the cross. If we sinfully choose disobedience instead of God's ways, we will reap what we sow. Sin always has consequences. But praise God that if we are in Christ, Jesus absorbed God's judgment against us at the cross! Knowing and savoring that gospel truth will help us to flee sin and embrace the repentant life that honors God.

Transition

For the rest of our time we'll look at two more historical books, Ezra and Nehemiah. These two tell us about the Jews' return from exile, just as God promised through Jeremiah. Yet, they show us that something is still missing. Things just don't seem to be as glorious as the prophets predicted. Where are the New Heavens and the New Earth Isaiah spoke of? Why don't the people have the new hearts that Jeremiah predicted? Where is the glorious and magnificent temple Ezekiel saw?

And, of course, we're in the same situation, aren't we? God's made good on some of his promises, but the best of them are still waiting. ***What are some of the challenges of living in this "in-between" time?***

[PRAY]

Ezra - Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah originally constituted one book,² so we'll treat them that way today. Many think it was Ezra the priest who assembled it. The history recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah spans from the time the Jews began to return to Jerusalem, in 538 BC to a century after that first return. Ezra himself gives us the historical context necessary to begin our study in **Ezra 1:1-4**. The Jews had been in exile for 70 years, when we read this:

²Only since the early Middle Ages have they been published as two books.

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 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. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

The Jews are coming home! It’s a time of real excitement and hope. It’s believed that **Psalm 126** was written at this time.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then they said among the nations,
 “The Lord has done great things for them.”
 The Lord has done great things for us;
 we are glad.

The redemptive-historical context is clear. After the trauma of the exile, the people are reminded that God is still faithful to His age-old promises. The nation’s been resurrected and the Mosaic Covenant reestablished. But the New Covenant isn’t yet here, and God’s final kingdom is still in the future. Instead, the postexilic nation is just one more earthly type of God’s great work to come.

Theme

Let’s summarize Ezra-Nehemiah like this:

God is renewing the covenant by restoring His people, the temple, true worship, and Jerusalem. But it’s not the end, and it doesn’t fulfill all the great prophecies. Thus His people still look to the future.

The return from exile was exciting. But it wasn't all it was expected to be. We're back in the land, but not in the New Heavens and the New Earth. Instead, we've got a kind of "exile in the land" as we saw earlier in Chronicles. Some people have new hearts, but not everyone. And we have a new temple, but it's no picture of glory. It all leaves the reader longing for something more, thinking there must be something more to come. Thinking back to Daniel, the seventy years have finished—so the physical exile is done. But the seventy "sevens" until the Messiah arrives have only just begun, and so the spiritual exile continues.

Let's walk through Ezra-Nehemiah now, and I'll point out some texts that most clearly demonstrate some key themes. And as we go I'll also fill you in on the chronology of all that's going on.

A. God Initiates and the People Respond: Ezra 1:5-6

What's important to notice about the beginning of the book is the focus on God's faithfulness to His promises. Remember what we just read in **Ezra 1:1**. Did you catch that reference to Jeremiah? Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would only last 70 years. Just as promised, 70 years later God *moved Cyrus' heart* to allow the Jews to return home. We also see in **verse 5** that God moved the hearts of the people to go as well. "Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem." God was entirely behind this restoration.

B. The People Return and Rebuild: Ezra 1:7 – 6:22

God then provided, piece by piece, all that the people need to rebuild their community. To start, we read in 1:7 "Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem" and gave them back to the Jews. This was no small thing. It probably included the golden altar, golden table, golden lampstands, golden basins, and massive bronze pillars, stands, and basins, so large they could not be weighed, as described in 1 Kings 7. This was enormous wealth. They were irreplaceable, and God has miraculously restored them to the people so they could re-institute proper temple worship.

Next, look at 2:2, where we see a man named Zerubbabel. What's significant about him is that he's of the royal line of David. God had promised to David that he would have a descendant

reigning over God's people *forever*. But at the end of 2 Kings we saw the last Davidic king carted off as a prisoner to Babylon. So the fact that *this guy* is leading God's people back to the promised land means God is still committed to His covenantal promises.

Another significant figure, also in verse 2, is Jeshua (or some translation may render his name Joshua). You'll notice from **verse 40** that he's a Levite, which means that, along with the line of kings, the line of priests is also being restored. As we read in Leviticus, it's the priests who make atoning sacrifices and lead the people into worship. And so the restoration of the priesthood is critical for restoring the people to a right relationship with God. Of course we also know that this priesthood necessarily points forward to a greater priest to come because the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin.

The other things needed for worship, besides the priests, are an altar and a temple. We read of their construction in chapters 3-6. After some opposition from unfriendly neighbors (ch. 4), the work was completed in 516 BC, a little over 20 years after the people's return (cf. 6:15). With the temple complete, they finally celebrate Passover again in 6:22. "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 [that is, Darius, king of Persia which had conquered Babylon which had conquered Assyria] to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." It's only fitting that worship resumes in the land at the temple with a Passover meal after God brought the people out again from under oppression by the Gentiles!

But all's not right. Look back at 3:12. "But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away." The temple meant so much, as we've already discussed. But some there could remember what the first temple looked like.³ And this new temple didn't come close to what God's people knew before. And while that was discouraging for them, we can see it as a sign that God wasn't finished. He still had greater things to come.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

³It had been destroyed only 50 years earlier, even though the exile itself had begun over 70 years earlier.

C. The People Sin and Repent: Ezra 7-10

At the beginning of **chapter 7** the story takes a big leap forward in time. Now we're in 458 BC, nearly 60 years after the temple's completed (cf. 7:7-9). Here, Ezra the priest is leading a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem. We learn about Ezra in 7:9-10 that "the good hand of his God was on him. 10 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." We can learn a great lesson from Ezra here. Notice that he studies and does the word of the Lord *before* he presumes to teach it.

But when Ezra arrives back in the land, he finds that many Jews have intermarried with the surrounding pagan nations, a grievous sin. We read in 9:1-3, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations... For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost."

Did you notice that reference to "the holy race?" Literally, that word for "race" is "seed." Remember God's promise in Genesis 3:15 that he would raise up a "seed" to crush the serpent's head. Israel was the carrier of the seed-promise. If they assimilated into pagan culture and abandoned their unique relationship with the true God, they risked losing the promise! If Satan can't kill off God's people through exile, he'll try to corrupt them instead.

So... what happens? Ezra prays (9:6-15), acknowledging the people's sin and God's holiness. Note the gravity of Ezra's confession and how well he understands the consequences of sin. "O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this." (v15).

In chapter 10 the people repent. And it's more than mere acknowledgment of sin or feeling bad. They take action to undo their sin, to restore right behavior toward God. They work to re-separate themselves from the surrounding nations.

The main lesson is that while the exiles have returned and rebuilt the Temple, God hasn't yet completed his plan of salvation. Look Ezra's prayer in **9:8**. "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." The remnant has returned, but it is only a "little reviving" from slavery. It all makes us say, "This can't be everything; there must be more to come."

D. Nehemiah Returns and the People Rebuild the Walls: Nehemiah 1-7

Which brings us to Nehemiah, and another phase of reestablishing the people back in the land. Nearly 100 years after the first exiles returned, Jerusalem's walls are still broken down. This means that the people, the Davidic line, and the priest-led worship are all still vulnerable to Israel's enemies. Both militarily and morally. So when Nehemiah, a government official serving the Persians in Susa, hears about this, he weeps and sets himself to prayer.

What's interesting about his prayer in **chapter 1** is that, like so many other prayers in the Bible, Nehemiah begins with a confession of sins in v6-7. "Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses." And, verses 10-11, he premises his request upon God's glory. Just like in so many other prayers we've seen (Moses' and Daniel's to name just two), the *ultimate* goal in prayer, is that He might be glorified by giving to us.

In chapter 2, Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem, about a decade after Ezra returned. When he gets there he's able to convince the people to rebuild the walls. On a quick side-note, look at what he says in **2:20**. "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build." Notice that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are there, right next to each other. Neither is compromised nor ignored. It's no problem for inspired authors to juxtapose these two great doctrines without apology. Thus those who earnestly love the word of God exult in and tremble at His sovereignty, and live lives of moral responsibility and accountability.

Returning to our story, we see the Jews experience opposition from their neighbors. These enemies first mocked the Jews for undertaking such a difficult and expensive task of engineering (4:1-3). But when the people are faithful and steadily make progress, the pagans' mockery turns to a plot to attack the builders. Nehemiah responds by arming the builders. So their enemies try (and fail) to undermine Nehemiah personally by slandering his reputation (chapter 6). Satan will sometimes try to attack God's people, and especially their leaders, with a frontal assault. And other times through more subtle means. But God is faithful to protect his people regardless.

Nehemiah also experiences opposition from *within* Israel (chapter 5). Some of the builders began to complain that the work is too expensive given their modest means. So Nehemiah convinces the nobles and officials to stop charging interest, which allows the work to continue. In the end the people complete the wall around Jerusalem in less than a year. This section of the text ends with these encouraging words in 7:73. "So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns." That return to rest sounds similar to those key passages in Joshua when the Israelites first took that land. It truly

is a re-beginning.

E. The People Rejoice – and Relapse: Nehemiah 8-13

So, we come to the part that everything else has been driving to: the reestablishment of the covenant! Look at **8:8**. “They [that is, the Levites] read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” It’s interesting to note the people’s reactions. Upon hearing the law read and expounded, it says in verse 6 that they shouted, “Amen! Amen!” But then in verse 9 it says that they wept. They were realizing that they’d broken that law they were reading. But the priests told the people not to mourn but to celebrate at the reading of God’s word. It seems that the people were rightly mourning their sin, and then rightly celebrating God’s grace in their lives.

I wonder, do you also have deep emotional reactions to the reading and teaching of the word of God? Does it cause you to weep, as the weight of you sin sinks in? Does it bring rejoicing that an infinitely holy God would give his own life to make us holy? I hope it does.

The long rebuilding and renewal process is complete when the people bind themselves again into covenant with God, in 10:29.

[All the people now] join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes.

The people are in the land, the line of David lives on (and therefore so does the seed of the woman), priests are making sacrifices on the altar, the temple is rebuilt, the walls around Jerusalem are secure, the law is publicly read and explained, and the people formally renew their commitment to God’s covenant.

So is this what we’ve been waiting for? Sadly, no. No sooner do the people renew the covenant than they break it again. In chapter 13 we see them violating the Sabbath. And once again they intermarry with the surrounding nations. And so we again see that same problem again. The law is not yet written on their hearts. This is not the full arrival of the kingdom of God. This is not the new covenant with new hearts in the new heaven and the new earth. Sin and death still reign.

We are here at the end of the Old Testament’s historical record, and the heart is still wickedly

deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it? A greater salvation, greater than the Exodus, greater than the return from exile must yet be coming. A greater kingdom, greater than David's, greater than Solomon's, greater than Ezra's and Nehemiah's, still awaits!

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

[PRAY]

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/old-testament-overview/>