

Good morning! Welcome to Eagle Ridge. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Matt Chesney. I am the director of youth and outreach here at Eagle Ridge and I'm excited to be speaking with you today. I always love it when I have the opportunity to preach and teach, and especially this year as we've been moving through the Bible chronologically. And today is a special day. Today is the last "official" sermon/teaching that will come out of the Old Testament. If you're reading along daily through the Bible (and I hope that you are!) we've still got a few more days of reading from the OT, but next week's message will be from the New Testament. So, anyway, I'm excited.

Now, you might think that the "end" of the Old Testament of the Bible is like the end of any other book. English teachers out there can confirm for us that any good story has an introduction (Genesis), introduction of a problem (Sin/Law), rising action (God's people continually messing up and unable to follow the law), a climax (exile and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple), and the conclusion. And then you have a neat little story. All contained, straightforward, bow on top! Right?

Well, perhaps, IF the Old Testament was the whole story. But it isn't. It's just part of the story. The New Testament isn't a sequel to the Old Testament. "Wow, that first book sold really well, we should make a part 2!" NO. It's all one story, with an overarching theme and purpose that has an intentional beginning and end. BUT, there is a dividing line between the two testaments. The reason why we call them the Old and the New Testaments. And today, I'm hoping that you'll see through our conversation about the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that the story is just getting started.

Ok, so, let's get to this! Today we are going to be talking about the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Why two books? (you might say). Well, fun fact... Ezra and Nehemiah were originally 1 book just called **Ezra**. Then around the 9<sup>th</sup> and through the 13<sup>th</sup> century it slowly became **1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Ezra** and then later **Ezra-Nehemiah**, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century they just split it into **Ezra and Nehemiah**.

Even weirder is that these 2 books actually have 3 stories in them that are all related to each other. The stories focus on 3 godly, Jewish men all living in Persia, who REALLY want to serve God well. And

they have some great ideas about how that can happen! The 3 men are Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

So let's start with Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel, (EDITED) prompted by God, decides that it's been 50 years since they've been exiled from their home, and the prophets said they would only be gone for 70, SO, it's time to rebuild the temple! So, he gets the permission of the King of Persia (EDITED) who was also prompted by God, and gets a WHOLE lot of the exiled Jews together and takes them all back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But, some weird stuff happened. First, they rebuild the foundation, and put up some walls – BUT – during the dedication ceremony the cloud of the glory of God doesn't descend and fill that area. LAST TIME when they built the temple and had the dedication ceremony, God's presence came down in a really thick cloud and covered/filled the area. This time... no cloud.

But many of the older priests, Levites, and other leaders who had seen the first Temple wept aloud when they saw the new Temple's foundation. The others, however, were shouting for joy. Ezra 3:12 NLT

Well, that's okay, right? Maybe God will come down later this time.... maybe when it's finished?

Either way, this ceremony was pretty awesome and the people were fired up. So fired up in fact, that the Jewish people that had never been taken into exile (and had stayed in Jerusalem) and the foreigners living in the area asked if they could help rebuild the temple. BUT, the exiled Jews that had come back considered these people enemies! Here are the verses:

So they approached Zerubbabel and the other leaders and said, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God just as you do. We have sacrificed to him ever since King Esarhaddon of Assyria brought us here."

<sup>3</sup>But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel replied, "You may have no part in this work. We alone will build the Temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, just as King Cyrus of Persia commanded us." Ezra 4:1-3 NLT

Well, that's a bit strange... especially considering that God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah about 150 years before Jerusalem was even destroyed (talking about the coming exile) and said this:

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

I will gather you and your children from east and west.

<sup>6</sup>I will say to the north and south,

‘Bring my sons and daughters back to Israel

from the distant corners of the earth.

<sup>7</sup>Bring all who claim me as their God,

for I have made them for my glory.

It was I who created them.”

<sup>8</sup>Bring out the people who have eyes but are blind,

who have ears but are deaf.

<sup>9</sup>Gather the nations together!

Assemble the peoples of the world!

Isaiah 43:5-9a NLT

Very strange stuff. Well, not too strange if you have lived on Earth for any length of time... people are people.. We segregate ourselves, put labels on people, and basically just treat each other poorly. So anyway, the temple gets built. It takes 20 years, but it gets done. To put it in a timeline for you, the temple is finished about 40 years before Esther becomes queen. On to story #2.

So about 20 years after Esther was made queen, Ezra steps onto the scene. The temple is built, but the people aren't doing a good job of following the Law, so Ezra decides he is going to go to Jerusalem and fix this problem! When he gets there, he discovers that the exiled people that had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple had intermarried with the non-exiled Jews and foreigners. And he gets really upset! Because according to him, Deuteronomy 23:1-4 said they weren't supposed to marry foreigners.

He neglected to read or remember that it wasn't really about marriage, it was more about joining the assembly when they worship. And also, there was an expiration date built into the command that said 3-10 generations... and it's been 30+ generations since that was said.

Regardless, Ezra decides to decree that all these people need to divorce their wives and send the women and children away and out of the nation. BUT... God never told Ezra to do this. And God spoke through the prophet Malachi (about 10 years before Ezra even left Persia) and said this:

Didn't the Lord make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. <sup>16</sup>“For I hate divorce!” says the Lord, the God of Israel. “To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife.” Malachi 2:15-16  
NLT

But, the decree happens, families are torn apart, and Ezra keeps working really hard to make sure people are following the rules. On to story #3.

So a little less than 10 years later, Nehemiah , who is serving as the king’s cupbearer hears about everything that is going on and asks the king if he can go rebuild the walls around Jerusalem to keep the people safe from enemies. The king likes Nehemiah, so he makes him governor of Jerusalem and says go do it! BUT... (you guessed it) God had spoken through the prophet Zechariah around the time the temple was being completed and said:

Then I looked up, and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand. <sup>2</sup>I asked, “Where are you going?”

He answered me, “To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is.”

(Zechariah is having a vision, and in the vision there is a guy who is on his way to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls)

<sup>3</sup>While the angel who was speaking to me was leaving, another angel came to meet him <sup>4</sup>and said to him: “Run, tell that young man, ‘Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it. <sup>5</sup>And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will be its glory within.’

Zechariah 2:1-4 NIV

In other words – Don’t build a wall! God will protect the people.

So, Nehemiah gets there checks the place out, starts organizing the exiled Jews and gets them to work on rebuilding the walls. Now, some of the people that live in the area, including non-exiled Jews, kinda laugh at the project and say, (more or less) “Really?! Are you sure you want to do this?” and...

I replied, “The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.” Nehemiah 2:20 NLT



So, he leads the exiled Jews in rebuilding the walls. And they get built! (and by the way, the way he organizes the people and gets the job done is incredible. There are a LOT of great lessons we can learn from him about how to get a big project done). And he and Ezra together work on some Spiritual Revival efforts... BUT.. The temple becomes neglected, God's law is not being followed, and Nehemiah ends up SUPER angry and starts beating people and ripping out their hair. All the while, every time he does something good (like feeding the poor) he says "Remember me, God" – in other words "Look what I did! Not like these other people!" sigh...

And that's the end of story #3.

So, we've got 3 godly, Jewish men each living in Persia, that REALLY want to serve God well and rebuild THEIR kingdom. And they didn't just attempt to do what they set out to do... they succeeded. The temple was rebuilt, God's law was "enforced," and the walls were rebuilt. And yet... God's presence wasn't dwelling in the temple, the law was enforced selectively and no one was really following it anyway, and God had said he didn't want any walls around the city.

Now, before we judge these guys too harshly we need to remember that they didn't have Jesus to explain to them what God wanted His Kingdom to be like. So, they were still operating under the previous "pre-exile" assumptions and teachings. The idea that God wanted His people (and in their mind, this meant just the Jews) in a nation, separate from other nations, together with Him. But God wiped out that kingdom. He wanted to start fresh. Ezekiel 10:18 even describes how the presence of the Lord LEFT the temple and wasn't coming back! (in that way).

So what's the application? How does this apply to our lives? Rather than just an interesting set of stories...

We need to remember, in humility, that we don't know the will of God. Instead of trying to do things that we THINK God wants, we need to focus on listening to Him and joining Him in what he is already doing. We need a shift in our thinking from arrogance to humility, and from (self-proclaimed) leader to follower (of Jesus).

We also need to remember that God may already be working toward something amazing that He (and we) want, but in a completely unexpected and amazing way. Allow me to explain...

Because we have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us – and because of our relationship with God – we often have desires and dreams for our world that mirror what God wants. He puts those desires in our hearts, and the longings we have for things like Peace, Love, Joy, Community, and so many other things – He has too... But when we try to accomplish these desires through our own human brokenness and flawed nature – we can make a big mess of things. Worse yet, we convince ourselves that what we are doing is what God **WANTS** us to do and that we should accomplish those desires by any means necessary.

We feel (sometimes) that the “ends” justify the “means.” And so to accomplish “peace” we trample on people’s freedoms. Or to accomplish “Community” we exclude people that we don’t want in that community. Or to accomplish “Joy” we sacrifice the joy of others.

This is something in particular our three guys didn’t recognize.

Zerubbable had a “godly” desire. He wanted the people to worship God. He wanted God to dwell with His people. He wanted to be

close to God. And God wanted all of those things too... But what Zerubbable didn't know was that...

**1. God is done with a physical temple – he wants living temples**

God's plan, through Jesus, accomplished so much more than what Zerubbable could have even imagined. God dwelled with his people in bodily form and now dwells inside of them. We have become living temples and are closer to God now than we ever were before.

Ezra had a "godly" desire. He wanted the people to follow God. He wanted them to do God's will and follow the example he laid out for them that would lead to the wonderful things God promised for them. But what Ezra didn't know was that...

**2. God is done with the Law – He wants a relationship with us**

God's plan, through Jesus, accomplished so much more than what Ezra could have ever imagined. God provided His people a living, breathing example to follow, not a set of rules. He came and taught us personally – experienced the same hardships and trials that we experience – and showed us how we could engage with a broken, messed up world and still follow God. And through all of that, Jesus

became so tangible for us that we can actually have a relationship with Him and know that he understands what we are going through.

Nehemiah had a “godly” desire. He wanted God’s people to be safe and secure with God. He wanted them living together in community and away from the dangers and evils of this world. He wanted what was best for God’s people. But what Nehemiah didn’t know was that..

3. God doesn’t want walls – He wants unity among his people and bridges to others.

God’s plan, through Jesus, accomplished so much more than what Nehemiah could have ever imagined. God’s people isn’t a particular nation or race. It is ALL people. And Jesus came to be the example, sacrifice, savior, and king for ALL people. Jesus’ work on the cross provided the security of our salvation that ANYONE who believes in Him will have eternal life. And by following Jesus’ example of going to “sick,” the “outcasts,” the “undesirables” in our world and serving them... we can be living bridges which allow those people to develop a relationship with God! And then JOIN His Kingdom.

God will work through and use the world today and the things we do/build. Just like he did with these guys. Just like he did with the evil kings and foreign nations in the Old Testament. But it is SO much better to be on God's team and follow Jesus into what His plans are. We don't need personal crusades (or the ACTUAL Crusades) to rebuild some era/kingdom that has long since been destroyed. God is moving forward. It is our job to watch and listen for where he is moving and join Him in that!

Systems don't work. Things like the "American Church Model" of building and gathering and growing... don't work.

What does work is Ralph Moore's house church network that exploded beyond control. (explain)

Cultivate – which is entirely focused on relationships and goes to the people. (explain, if needed)

Discipleship works. Individuals building relationships with individuals and learning to follow Jesus together.

Political and Social reforms do not address the heart... and the HEART is exactly what God wants.

Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah are not bad guys. They were godly men who (perhaps overzealously) wanted to do what was right. But what they built and how they built it... was the Jerusalem that set the stage for Jesus to come and knock it all back down. God was not going to allow His people to rebuild what he destroyed. So Jesus came and He knocked down the IDEAS. He destroyed our concept of the temple. He destroyed our concept of following a law in favor of following Him! He destroyed our concept of a separate nation with walls in favor of a unified people that is a blessing to ALL people and ALL nations!

So, what can you do today, or this week, to take a step toward heart change?

### Steps of Obedience

The first thing is to Acknowledge your potential personal crusades and identify if God has led you into them, or if you are leading God.

That's a funny statement isn't it? Leading God... But that's exactly what you're attempting to do if you have an agenda or personal crusade that you believe is right. You're deciding to do something or fix something and assuming that God's got your back and wants you to do it – because it's "Good."

There are plenty of "Good" things that we can do (like building temples, teaching the law, and building walls), but are you sure that God has led you there? Or are you leading God? If you discover that you've got some personal crusades – it's time to let them go and repent.

The next thing is to **Stop. Be Still. Pray. And Listen!**

Stop.... Be still... Pray.... And Listen....

**Be still in the presence of the Lord,  
and wait patiently for him to act.**

**Psalm 37:7 NLT**



Probably the hardest step of obedience you've ever been given. For most of us, we would say this is impossible. But it's your job to make it possible. If you do nothing else this week, but this – you'll be on the right track.

Stop.... Be still... Pray.... And Listen....

Can you try? Let's try it now...