

READING EZRA AND NEHEMIAH TOGETHER

JULY 2026

What? Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible. They tell the history of God's people after their promised return to Jerusalem from exile. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, the people rebuilt the temple and the city wall, as well as renewing their commitment to God's word. The narrative incorporates Ezra and Nehemiah's memoirs and other documents.

When? The books cover events spanning a hundred years from 538 BC, during the Persian Empire. Four Persian kings are mentioned: Cyrus, Darius I, Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. The prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were active in this period.

Why? This was a potentially discouraging time for God's people. Their return from exile was the fulfilment of God's promises (Ezra 1:1), yet they did not experience the full restoration they anticipated. There was no king on David's throne and there were ongoing issues with opposition and disobedience. When first written, these books helped God's people think about their identity as his holy people, as they waited for the arrival of the longed-for Messiah. Today, they help us think about our identity and mission, as we await Christ's return.

TIMELINE OF EZRA–NEHEMIAH

To understand more of the background, you may find it helpful to look in a study Bible, a Bible atlas or a commentary.

586 BC Judah taken into exile in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar

539 Babylonian king defeated by King Cyrus of Persia

538 Cyrus issues a decree for exiles to return home (Ezra 1)

537 The altar is rebuilt and temple rebuilding begins (Ezra 3)

530 Temple rebuilding stops, following opposition (Ezra 4)

520 Temple rebuilding resumes (Ezra 5)

516 Temple rebuilding complete (Ezra 6)

There is a significant gap between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7

458 Ezra arrives in Jerusalem and teaches God's word (Ezra 7)

445 Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, and the wall is rebuilt

Most of Nehemiah takes place within a few months

433 Nehemiah returns to Susa (Nehemiah 5:14, 13:6)

A SUGGESTED READING PLAN

July has 31 days. Ezra and Nehemiah have 23 chapters. If you read one chapter per day, you have some extra days to meditate on longer chapters or dig deeper into sections that particularly encourage or challenge you.

ADVICE FOR READING EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

See litchardmission.co.uk/rbt for some extra resources to help.

- If you're struggling, **remember to ask God for help!**
 - The **main character** in biblical narrative is always the Lord, not Ezra or Nehemiah. These books are first and foremost a record of the Lord's promises, actions and plans.
 - As we read, we need to remember the **building project** we are part of – not a temple or a city, but the church of Christ.
 - The **lists of names** and other details can be off-putting. But these passages show us how the Lord uses ordinary people in ordinary places to carefully accomplish his plans.
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WHAT ABOUT MIXED MARRIAGES?

In Ezra 10, Ezra instructs people to separate from "foreign wives". Nehemiah also objects to these mixed marriages. Why?

- The concern was **spiritual purity**, not racial purity. These wives worshipped foreign gods. The nation were in danger of being led astray and repeating the sins that led to exile.
- God's plan was always to **bless people of all nations**. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the Lord welcomes women from other nations who turn to him, like Rahab and Ruth.
- Today, **intercultural marriages** between believers are a glorious reflection of Christ's reconciling work for all nations.
- Ezra 10 **is not a model for today**. Believers should only marry other believers, but those already in spiritually mixed marriages should remain married if possible (1 Cor 7:12-15).

FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

You might find it helpful to make notes as you read, so that you can remember what the Lord has been teaching you, use it to encourage others, and bring it to him in prayer.

1. **What does this passage teach me about the Lord's power and plans?** Behind all the events of Ezra and Nehemiah lies the faithful, sovereign hand of the Lord, working out his perfect plans.
2. **How do these verses lead me to worship Christ?** The people of Ezra and Nehemiah's day were looking forward to the coming of Christ. We can now look back and see how Christ fulfils all the promises and hopes of the past.
3. **How is Christ equipping me as part of his church?** These books have much to teach us about the identity and mission of God's people. We live in a different era of God's plans, but there are still lessons for us as his people today.
4. **How do these books help me to persevere in faith?** In Romans 15:4, we read that "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction... that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."
5. **Is the Lord calling me to repent?** As we see the people being challenged about their sin and unfaithfulness, the Holy Spirit may convict us of our own need for repentance.