

# Ezra and Nehemiah

## The Lord Is Faithful

*“I will gather them and bring them to the place that  
I have chosen, to make My name dwell there. . . .”*

Nehemiah 1:9

Albert B. Collver III



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# Contents

An Outline of Ezra .....	6
An Outline of Nehemiah .....	7
The Lists of Ezra and Nehemiah .....	8
The Letters in Ezra .....	9
Introduction .....	11
Lesson 1—Prophecy, Promise, and Fulfillment .....	13
Lesson 2—Return from Exile .....	19
Lesson 3—Rebuilding the Temple .....	25
Lesson 4—Completion of the Temple .....	31
Lesson 5—Return of Ezra .....	37
Lesson 6—Ezra’s Reforms .....	43
Lesson 7—Return of Nehemiah .....	49
Lesson 8—Rebuilding the Wall .....	55
Lesson 9—Internal and External Problems .....	61
Lesson 10—Restoration of the Divine Service .....	68
Lesson 11—Nehemiah’s Final Acts .....	74
<b>Leader Notes</b>	
Lesson 1 .....	85
Lesson 2 .....	89
Lesson 3 .....	94
Lesson 4 .....	97
Lesson 5 .....	101
Lesson 6 .....	104
Lesson 7 .....	108
Lesson 8 .....	112
Lesson 9 .....	116
Lesson 10 .....	120
Lesson 11 .....	124



<i>History</i>	<i>Date (BC)</i>	<i>Ezra and Nehemiah</i>
Reign of Cyrus II	<b>559–530</b>	
Persians defeat the Babylonians	<b>539</b>	
Cyrus II issues emancipation decree	<b>538</b>	Ezra 1:1–4; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23
Jews return to their homeland	<b>538/537</b>	Ezra 2; Nehemiah 7
Altar rebuilt	<b>538/537</b>	Ezra 3:2
Temple foundations laid	<b>536</b>	Ezra 3:8–10
Opposition to rebuilding encountered	<b>536–520</b>	Ezra 4:1–5
Reign of Darius	<b>522–486</b>	Ezra 5:6–17; 6:1–22
Haggai and Zechariah prophesy to the Jews	<b>520</b>	Ezra 5:1–5; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1
Temple dedicated in Jerusalem	<b>520–515</b>	Ezra 6:13–22; Haggai 1:14–15
Reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus); Esther and Mordecai in Persian court	<b>486–465</b>	Book of Esther
Reign of Artaxerxes I	<b>464–424</b>	
Opposition to the Jews	<b>463 (?)</b>	Ezra 4:7–23
Ezra arrives in Judah during the reign of Artaxerxes I; Malachi active before Nehemiah comes on the scene	<b>458</b>	Ezra 7:1, 8
Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem; city walls completed; Nehemiah holds convocation	<b>445</b>	Nehemiah 2:1–6; 6:15; 7:73; 8:2
Nehemiah visits Babylon and returns to Jerusalem	<b>433</b>	Nehemiah 13:6–7

# An Outline of Ezra

The Book of Ezra covers about one hundred years. The first six chapters present the Jews' return from exile and the restoration of the temple. Some thirty-eight years after the events detailed in chapter 6, Ezra enters the scene in chapter 7.

The shifting of narrative between the first and third person may seem to confuse the story. Yet these shifts serve a purpose. The first-person narrative provides a personal and subjective view of the events, while the third-person narrative provides an objective view.

A summary outline of both books:

A Historical Review (Ezra 1–6)

Ezra's Memoir, Part 1 (Ezra 7–10)

Nehemiah's Memoir, Part 1 (Nehemiah 1–7)

Ezra's Memoir, Part 2 (Nehemiah 8–10)

Nehemiah's Memoir, Part 2 (Nehemiah 11–13)

An outline of Ezra:

I. Return to Jerusalem from Captivity (chs. 1–6)

A. Return from Exile (chs. 1–2)

1. Cyrus's Decree (1:1–4)

2. Return under Sheshbazzar (1:5–8)

3. Lists of Temple Furnishings and People (1:9–2:70)

B. Rebuilding the Temple (chs. 3–4)

C. Completion of the Temple (chs. 5–6)

II. Return of Ezra and His Reforms (chs. 7–10)

A. Ezra's Return (chs. 7–8)

B. Ezra's Reforms (chs. 9–10)

# An Outline of Nehemiah

Nehemiah was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. When Nehemiah heard that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were in ruins, he asked Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC, approximately fifteen years after Ezra initiated his reforms. Nehemiah became the governor of Judah and introduced many of his own reforms. The Book of Nehemiah can be divided into three sections.

- I. Nehemiah's Arrival and the Rebuilding of the Walls and Gates (1–7:73a)
  - A. Nehemiah's Return to Jerusalem (chs. 1–2)
  - B. Rebuilding of the Wall (chs. 3–4)
  - C. Internal and External Problems (5:1–7:73a)
  
- II. Restoration of the Divine Service (7:73b–10:39)
  - A. The Reading of the Law (7:73b–8:18)
  - B. The Great Confession (9:1–37)
  - C. The Making of the Covenant (9:38–10:39)
  
- III. Lists of Various Kinds and Nehemiah's Last Deeds (chs. 11–13)
  - A. Repopulation of Jerusalem and Judah (ch. 11)
  - B. List of Priests and Levites (12:1–26)
  - C. Dedication of the City Walls (12:27–43)
  - D. Service at the Temple (12:44–47)
  - E. Nehemiah's Final Reforms (13:1–29)
  - F. Conclusion (13:30–31)

# The Lists of Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra 1:9–11	Returned vessels
Ezra 2	Returned exiles
Ezra 8:1–14	Men who separated from foreign wives
Nehemiah 3	Builders of the wall
Nehemiah 7:5–72	Returned exiles (repeated from Ezra 2)
Nehemiah 10:1–29	Signatories of the pledge
Nehemiah 11:3–36	Settlers and settlements
Nehemiah 12:1–26	Priests and Levites
Nehemiah 12:32–42	Members of the community

The lists in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah can seem uninteresting and tedious, but they serve an important role. Although the lists include inanimate objects such as gold, silver, and temple vessels, the majority of the lists are of people. The lists help to show that God’s dwelling place is not just within the temple, but is also within His people. God’s *people* are now His temple.

This echoes Paul: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19–22).

# The Letters in Ezra

- 1:2–4 Cyrus’s proclamation of return, 538 BC
- 4:11–16 Letter to Artaxerxes against the Jews, about 463 BC
- 4:17–22 Letter from Artaxerxes ordering rebuilding to cease
- 5:7–17 Tattenai to King Darius, about 520 BC
- 6:2–5 Cyrus’s proclamation of return found during Darius’s reign; originally 538 BC but rediscovered about 520 BC
- 6:6–12 Darius to Tattenai, about 520 BC
- 7:12–26 Artaxerxes to Ezra, 458 BC

For Christians today, the letters in Ezra help show how the Lord fulfilled His promise to deliver His Old Testament people. As God’s New Testament saints, we see how this deliverance segues into the coming of Christ. Jesus is God’s ultimate fulfillment of His promise to deliver His people, to which all other fulfilled prophecies point. God’s faithfulness in the past encourages us that He will be faithful to us today. God will surely deliver also us from our foes, trials, and sufferings, either now in time or most certainly in eternity. He promises us so in His Word.

The letters in Ezra are important historical resources that help to tell God’s salvation story. The letters are also the subject of much scholarly writing and debate. Because they are not presented chronologically, some critical scholars question the historical accuracy of Ezra and Nehemiah. Other scholars propose that Nehemiah should be placed before Ezra. Still others have tried to correct chronological difficulties by suggesting the author of Ezra simply did not know his Persian kings and wrote “Artaxerxes” when he meant to write “Cambyses.” Such textual alterations are unnecessary.

In fact, the nonchronological presentation in Ezra serves an important function in the story of Ezra (and Nehemiah). It makes use of a literary device called “resumptive repetition,” which inserts present events into the past to show how the events are related.

Ezra 1 begins with Cyrus’s proclamation (538 BC) to return the exiles to Jerusalem so that they can begin rebuilding the temple. In Ezra 4, the letter to Artaxerxes (before 445 BC) is used to highlight the opposition, faced by the exiles, in rebuilding the city and its walls. This opposition resulted in Artaxerxes’ command to stop the rebuilding. In Ezra 5, the story focuses on previous opposition encountered in the rebuilding of the temple. This was connected with the opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, even though the events are separated by nearly sixty years. In the first part of Ezra 6, Cyrus’s proclamation that the exiles are to return and build the temple is repeated. This repetition reinforces that the opposition to the rebuilding program was against Cyrus’s and God’s will.

After repeating Cyrus’s proclamation, Ezra resumes telling about rebuilding of the temple. The letter from Darius instructs that opposition to the rebuilding of the temple cease. The temple is rebuilt and the sacrifices resume. The completion of the temple shows that the Lord is faithful to His promises. On that encouraging note, in Ezra 7 we find the letter from Artaxerxes commanding that the rebuilding program resume in accordance with Cyrus’s decree and the will of God. In addition to the rebuilding of the city, Artaxerxes commands that Ezra return to Jerusalem to oversee this work. In addition to rebuilding Jerusalem, the Lord has also given His people a faithful shepherd who will guide them. Ezra 8 then chronicles Ezra’s work. The Book of Nehemiah complements and provides further proof that the Lord is faithful to His promises.

# Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the final events of the Old Testament period, approximately four centuries before the birth of Christ. The Book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus (see Isaiah 44:28 and 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). Ezra recounts the return of the exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. Nehemiah records his return to Jerusalem with the third wave of returning exiles and concludes his book with the rebuilding of the city’s walls. Together, Ezra and Nehemiah cover approximately a century of Israel’s history. They are contemporaneous with several other books in the Bible, including the end of 2 Chronicles and the books of Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and perhaps Malachi.

Some scholars believe that an unknown author, sometimes called “the Chronicler,” wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. However, even if he did pen 1 and 2 Chronicles, it is more likely that Ezra wrote the entire book bearing his name. Ezra may have used written and oral resources for chapters 1–6 while providing a personal account for the remainder of his book. Because of their similarities, some scholars have treated Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. However, since both Ezra and Nehemiah offer first-person narratives, it is most likely that they were written by separate individuals.

The literary style of Ezra and Nehemiah belongs to the historical genre. Quite literally, these books contain the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, providing background material, lists, and letters to support the memoirs. Since Moses began writing the Pentateuch under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God has recorded His salvation history in His Word. Through His prophets and the writers of Scripture, God is the Father and author of

history. The Book of Moses describes the history of the Lord's people from the foundation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, and the entry of His people into the Promised Land. Combined with Ezra and Nehemiah, the rest of the Old Testament covers the history of the Lord's people from King David to the release of the Lord's people and the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to rebuild Jerusalem and her temple.

In the *Preface to Galeatius Capella's History*, Martin Luther speaks highly of the Church's historians. Luther observes that historians are the most useful people and the best teachers. He also notes that the Jewish people were master historians, as the books of Judges, Kings, and Chronicles show. He also mentions that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate how historians are useful (AE 34:276).

However, Ezra and Nehemiah are more than just useful histories. They offer more than third-person accounts of actual events. These two books are divinely-inspired memoirs. In literature, a memoir is a historical account written by a person involved in the events as they happened. As mentioned previously, the events occurring in Ezra and Nehemiah are recorded in first person.

This distinction between history and memoir is important. It shows that Ezra and Nehemiah were not only observers of what the Lord was doing for His people, but they were included in the Lord's promise and in His saving deeds. Ezra and Nehemiah were a part of what the Lord was doing for His Church. (You'll notice the names of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel among Jesus' ancestors in Matthew 1:12–17 and Luke 3:23, 27.) Through Holy Baptism, the Lord has also made His promises to us and has made us part of His salvation history. We are not spectators sitting on the sidelines; we are now a part of the Church's ongoing story. So in a very real way, the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is our story. Just as the Lord was faithful to His promises of old, He is faithful to His promises to you and to me, through Christ Jesus, our Lord.

# Lesson 1

## Prophecy, Promise, and Fulfillment

When they consider biblical prophecies and their fulfillment, many Christians primarily think about the coming of Jesus. And they aren't be wrong. Around Christmas time, we hear how the Old Testament messianic prophecies are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, we hear Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted from the cross. This is the "big picture" of biblical prophecy. All of Scripture testifies about Christ (Luke 24:27). Nevertheless, in a very real sense, the return of the Jews from captivity to the land of Israel was also a prophecy to be fulfilled. According to God's plan, this happened so that the Messiah could be born in Bethlehem. Books like Ezra and Nehemiah connect the promised return to Jerusalem to the "big picture" of God accomplishing the salvation of the world through His Son.

During the exile to Babylon, it seemed as if the Lord had abandoned His people. The Book of Daniel, which records events during the Babylonian captivity, tells of a remnant of the Lord's people who remained faithful to His Word. During the trial and hardship of the captivity, the Lord did not forget His people. He remembered His promise to dwell among them.

### **Historical Background**

Read 2 Kings 21:1–16. The events recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah were the result of Israel's sins. Manasseh, the son of

Hezekiah, did evil in the sight of the Lord. He reestablished idol worship to Baal, made an Asherah (most likely set up a wooden pole or pike dedicated to the goddess), and sacrificed his own son as an offering to the idols. Manasseh perpetrated more evil than the people the Lord had driven out of the land before the Israelites. Because of Manasseh's sins, the Lord threatened to bring destruction upon Jerusalem. Even though the people of Israel had provoked the Lord to anger since they had left Egypt (v. 15), Manasseh's sins in particular resulted in their captivity. Finally, the Lord sent Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to attack Jerusalem and to carry a group of people into captivity (see 2 Kings 24:10–17). These events set the stage for the restoration, recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. Read Hebrews 12:7–11. For what reasons does the Lord discipline His children? Is discipline ever a pleasant experience?
2. Through hardship and trial, God draws His children closer to Himself through repentance and faith. If you feel comfortable, share with the group a time when you have experienced this in your life.

## **The Role of the Temple**

During the exodus (1446 BC), the Lord led His people in a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. From the ark of the covenant, God's special dwelling place on earth, God displayed His glory. Some four hundred years later and in the Promised Land, King David established the kingdom of Israel and defeated most of her enemies. His great desire was to build

a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. Because he was a man of blood and war, the Lord did not permit David to build the temple. Instead, his son Solomon built it. The temple was both a house of prayer and a place of worship. The Lord promised to dwell in His temple and make Himself accessible there. The people could be certain that the Lord would offer there for them His grace and forgiveness.

3. Read 1 Kings 8:6–11, 22–24, 27–30. What promise did the Lord fulfill with the building of the temple by Solomon?
4. Why did Solomon say, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like You, in heaven above or on earth beneath” (v. 23)?
5. If the highest heaven cannot contain God, how could He dwell in an earthly temple?

The destruction of the temple and of the city of Jerusalem was the Lord’s righteous judgment against His people for their sin. The people were scattered and put into captivity in Babylon. Seventy years later, the Lord remembered the promise He made to His people to deliver them from their enemies and to rebuild the temple. This is the story told by Ezra and Nehemiah.

6. Read 2 Kings 24:20; 25:1–9. What does it mean to be cast out of the Lord’s presence?

7. How did the temple's destruction show that the people of Israel were cast out from God's presence?
8. What is the ultimate consequence or penalty for being cast out from the Lord's presence?

### **Jesus and His People as God's Temple**

*Incarnation* means "in the flesh." The Christian Church speaks of the incarnation of Jesus as God becoming human flesh. The incarnation and birth of the Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth fulfill the Lord's promise to dwell among His people.

9. Read Isaiah 7:14; John 1:14; and Colossians 2:9–10. How did the temple in Jerusalem serve to point to Jesus' incarnation?

Keeping that in mind, when it comes to the location of the Lord's presence on earth, Ezra and Nehemiah shift their focus very slightly away from the temple *building* and toward the Lord's faithful *people*. Ezra and Nehemiah, more than other Old Testament writers, emphasize community. (See "The Lists of Ezra and Nehemiah" in the introduction as well as Ephesians 2:19–22.)

10. Read 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. What is so important about God's people being His temple?

## God's Word for Today

The captivity of God's people in Babylon and their deliverance from it can seem like ancient events that have little relevance for us today. Yet Ezra and Nehemiah show us that God is faithful to His promise to deliver His people. During their captivity, God's people longed for the surety of His presence among them, the surety they enjoyed while the temple of God was in their midst. Just as the temple pointed forward to God's fullness dwelling in the body of Jesus, Ezra and Nehemiah prepare us to see that, in Him, we are God's temple.

11. Read Matthew 28:20 and 1 Corinthians 6:19. How does knowing you are God's temple help when you feel lonely or experience hardship and suffering?
  
12. Read Matthew 1:12–17 and Luke 3:23, 27. How is the story of Ezra and Nehemiah also Jesus' story and our own?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Look at a Bible atlas to find maps of the Babylonian and Persian empires.
- Identify other places in Scripture where the Lord made a promise and fulfilled it.
- Read Ezra 1–2 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “God Himself Is Present” (*LSB* 907):

God Himself is present: Let us now adore Him  
And with awe appear before Him. God is in His temple;  
All within keep silence; Humbly kneel in deepest rev'rence.  
He alone On His throne  
Is our God and Savior; Praise His name forever!

God Himself is present: Hear the harps resounding;  
See the hosts the throne surrounding.  
“Holy, holy, holy!” Hear the hymn ascending,  
Songs of saints and angels blending.  
Bow Your ear To us here:  
Hear, O Christ, the praises That Your Church now raises.

Fount of ev'ry blessing, Purify my spirit,  
Trusting only in Your merit.  
Like the holy angels, Worshiping before You,  
May I ceaselessly adore You.  
Let Your will Ever still  
Rule Your Church terrestrial As the hosts celestial.

Pray: Most merciful God, You gave Your eternal Word to become incarnate of the pure Virgin. Grant Your people grace to put away fleshly lusts, that they may be ready for Your visitation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Dawn)

# Lesson 2

## Return from Exile

In the last session, we focused on how the Lord is faithful to His promises and how, ultimately, His people are His temple through Christ, our Lord. In this lesson, we will learn how God’s Spirit stirred up Cyrus, the king of Persia, to deliver His people out of captivity so that they could rebuild the Jerusalem temple. We’ll also read a list of returning exiles. Those mentioned in this list had waited a long time for the Lord to fulfill His prophecy to return them to their home. When the time was right, God’s Spirit stirred them through God’s promises, and they were enabled for the task. As we will see, Ezra 1–2 emphasizes the Spirit’s work in accomplishing God’s goals and purposes.

### Cyrus’s Decree

Read Ezra 1:1. The Persian emperor Cyrus the Great (580–529 BC) defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC. Several hundred years before Cyrus was born, Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would deliver God’s people from captivity (Isaiah 44:24–28; 45:1–13). Keep in mind that the word *messiah* means “anointed one.”

13. How was Cyrus the Lord’s “shepherd” (Isaiah 44:28) and His “anointed” (Isaiah 45:1)?

14. How is Jesus God’s ultimate “Shepherd” who is “anointed” without measure by the Lord?

Notice that Ezra wrote: “that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled” (Ezra 1:1). Ezra does not mention Isaiah, even though Isaiah mentioned Cyrus by name. To contemporary readers exposed to religious skepticism, it might seem amazing that the Lord caused Cyrus’s name to be recorded hundreds of years before his birth. Nevertheless, Ezra was aware of Isaiah’s prophecy and the Lord’s promise to punish the king of Babylon (Jeremiah 25:12–13; 29:10).

15. Why would the punishment of the king of Babylon be good news?

16. Read Revelation 6:10 and Psalm 74:10–11. In what way is it proper for Christians to pray for the punishment of their enemies?

In 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, the last enemy the Lord will destroy is death. The destruction of our enemies, especially the destruction of death, is good news for us. Cyrus was anointed, selected, and chosen by the Lord to destroy the enemy of Israel that placed them in captivity. In a similar way, Jesus was chosen to destroy our enemies—sin, death, and the devil—that have put us into captivity. Although the exact circumstances are different, the Lord seems to work in similar patterns or ways throughout history.

17. Who were some of Old Testament Israel's enemies that the Lord destroyed?
  
18. How has the Lord used His Church to curb or destroy evil in this world?

### **Return under Sheshbazzar**

Read Ezra 1:2–8. God's Spirit not only stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to release the Jews, but He also stirred up the houses of Judah, Benjamin, and the priests and Levites to rebuild God's house.

19. How does the Lord's use of Cyrus show that He is the Lord of all history?

Imagine for a moment that a foreign country destroyed your home city, took you captive, and relocated you. In this foreign land, you learned a new language, were able to make a living, raised your children, and saw your children have grandchildren. Your grandchildren knew no other life—the “foreign land” was their home. From a practical standpoint, who would want to leave the country they knew to move to a homeland that was desolate, destroyed, and needed to be rebuilt?

20. In light of Israel's experience, how does God's Spirit stir us to live in this world as strangers looking toward our home in heaven?

## **Lists of Temple Furnishings and People**

Read Ezra 1:9–2:70. Discuss this passage in light of the “The Lists of Ezra and Nehemiah” in the introductory material.

21. How did God’s Spirit stir Cyrus to aid God’s people in reestablishing divine worship?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
22. Why was it important for Ezra to list the people returning from exile?

## **God’s Word for Today**

Some Christian teachers take certain Scripture passages and wed them to contemporary events in order to predict the future. However, God has spoken with finality through His Son. His Son points us to God’s sure Word, not to human speculation or predictions. God’s Word shows us that God works through history to benefit His Church—and that includes each and every believer.

Also, Paul teaches this in a very consoling way. He explains that God in His purpose has ordained before the time of the world by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of His elect to the image of His Son. His cross shall and must work together for good for everyone, because they are called according to God’s purpose. Therefore, Paul has concluded that it is certain and beyond doubt that neither “tribulation, or distress,” neither “death nor life,” or other such things “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (See Romans 8:28, 29, 35, 38, 39.) (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI:49)

23. Read Romans 8:18–37. What are some examples of how God worked good out of your suffering?
24. How do sufferings help conform us to the image of God’s Son?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Reflect on how the Lord has stirred you up through His Word and forgiving gifts (Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper).
- Reflect on how the Lord has used hardship, trial, and suffering in your life for a good purpose.
- Read Ezra 3–4 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” (*LSB* 500):

Creator Spirit, by whose aid

The world’s foundations first were laid,  
Come, visit ev’ry humble mind;  
Come, pour Your joys on humankind;  
From sin and sorrow set us free;  
May we Your living temples be.

O Source of uncreated light,

The bearer of God’s gracious might,  
Thrice-holy fount, thrice-holy fire,

Our hearts with heav'nly love inspire;  
Your sacred, healing message bring  
To sanctify us as we sing.

Giver of grace, descend from high;  
Your sev'nfold gifts to us supply;  
Help us eternal truths receive  
And practice all that we believe;  
Give us Yourself that we may see  
The glory of the Trinity.

Immortal honor, endless fame  
Attend the almighty Father's name;  
The Savior-Son be glorified,  
Who for all humankind has died;  
To You, O Paraclete, we raise  
Unending songs of thanks and praise.

Pray: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent)

# Lesson 3

## Rebuilding the Temple

Ezra 3 describes the rebuilding of the altar in Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the sacrificial system. This took place in the first seven months of the children of Israel's return to Jerusalem. At the beginning of the second year of return, the foundation of the temple was rebuilt. This was an extremely important event that further proved the Lord was intent on dwelling among His people.

Ezra 4 recounts the opposition to the rebuilding project. While on the surface, human rivalries contributed to this opposition, below lay a very real spiritual issue. The temple was God's special dwelling place on earth, where His people received the forgiveness of sins and worshiped the Lord. Satan and his evil host want nothing more than to prevent God's people from receiving forgiveness of their sins. As noted in the introductory material, chapter 4 also breaks chronological sequence to help those in Ezra's day to see how opposition to their work was similar to problems faced by their ancestors.

### Rebuilding the Altar

Read Ezra 3:1–7. The people of Israel were living in their prescribed towns around Jerusalem, and now they had gathered to offer sacrifice on the altar of the Lord.

25. Read 1 Kings 9:3 and Deuteronomy 12:1–7. God gave specific instructions to His people regarding the place for them to present tithes, offerings, and sacrifices. Where was it?

The Lord prescribed both *where* His people were to worship Him and *how* they were to do so. At first, this prescription may seem restrictive. Yet God wanted His people to be certain that He was graciously with them and that their sins were forgiven.

26. Prescribed sacrifices and ceremonies assured God's Old Testament people of their forgiveness and their inclusion into God's family. Are there any parallels to this in the New Testament?

## **Rebuilding the Temple**

Read Ezra 3:8–13. The people did not wait long to begin rebuilding the temple; they began the second month of the second year of their return. This is probably the earliest time the returnees could begin. They would have had to find places to live and to gather supplies for the rebuilding. And yet, the rebuilt temple did not compare in splendor to the former temple. Because of this, mixed in with the joyous shouting was the sound of weeping (v. 12). Those who had seen the former temple could not help but make the comparison.

27. Read Haggai 2:1–9. God promised that the “treasures of all nations” (v. 7; “the desire of all nations,” KJV) would come in. To whom does this refer (see Malachi 3:1)?

## **Opposition to Rebuilding**

Read Ezra 4:1–6. The people of Israel neither associated with the people living in the land, nor did they rebuild the temple with their help.

28. Who opposed the rebuilding of the temple?

Read Ezra 4:7–16. Review “The Letters in Ezra” in the introductory material. Note that verse 7 (about 463 BC) picks up about sixty years after verse 6 (about 520 BC).

29. What building activity does the letter to King Artaxerxes describe?

30. In light of the explanation given in “The Letters in Ezra,” why did Ezra insert a letter from his time in the middle of a story that took place sixty years earlier?

31. Read Ezra 4:17–23. (Note this takes place around Ezra’s time.) What were the Israelites accused of?

32. What did the king decree?

Read Ezra 4:24. (Note this verse describes events sixty years before v. 23.)

33. What work was stopped in verse 23?

34. What work was stopped in verse 24?

## **God's Word for Today**

In this section of Ezra, we saw the Lord fulfilling His promise to bring His people back to Jerusalem and to rebuild His house. There, He would reestablish worship—the sacrifices and the festivals appointed in the Book of Moses. We also saw how God's enemies opposed this project in order to discourage God's people and to make them doubt God's promises.

35. Read Matthew 2:7–18. What political, sociological, and spiritual forces tried to hinder or even destroy Jesus?

36. What forces oppose the Gospel today?

## **In Closing**

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Consider how the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh oppose the Lord's work.
- Compare and contrast that opposition to the opposition presented in this portion of Ezra.
- Read Ezra 5–6 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “Built on the Rock” (*LSB* 645):

Built on the Rock the Church shall stand  
Even when steeples are falling.  
Crumbled have spires in eve’ry land;  
Bells still are chiming and calling,  
Calling the young and old to rest,  
But above all the souls distressed,  
Longing for rest everlasting.

Surely in temples made with hands  
God, the Most High, is not dwelling;  
High above earth His temple stands,  
All earthly temples excelling.  
Yet He who dwells in heav’n above  
Chooses to live with us in love,  
Making our bodies His temple.

We are God’s house of living stones,  
Built for His own habitation.  
He through baptismal grace us owns  
Heirs of His wondrous salvation.  
Were we but two His name to tell,  
Yet He would deign with us to dwell  
With all His grace and His favor.

Here stands the font before our eyes,  
Telling how God has received us.  
The altar recalls Christ’s sacrifice  
And what His Supper here gives us.  
Here sound the Scriptures that proclaim  
Christ yesterday, today, the same,  
And evermore, our Redeemer.

Grant, then, O God, Your will be done,  
That, when the church bells are ringing,  
Many in saving faith may come  
Where Christ His message is bringing:  
“I know My own; My own know Me.  
You, not the world, My face shall see.  
My peace I leave with you. Amen.”

Pray: Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for Proper 16, Series A)

# Lesson 4

## Completion of the Temple

The Book of Ezra begins on a high note: Cyrus's proclamation that the people of Israel should return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the temple. God's promised deliverance of His people was coming to pass. However, the Israelites' desire and effort would soon be opposed with the order to cease all work. Ezra 5–6 are the chapters where the story turns around. Despite obstacles, the Lord was indeed faithful to His promise. This gave His people comfort and hope.

This section also illustrates the rising importance of written communication. Notice how the officials in Persia searched the archives for written records of King Cyrus's proclamation. The people of Israel also appealed to written documents. Letters were exchanged. Later in Ezra and Nehemiah, we'll read about a lost book of Scripture being found and read to the people. In short, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah highlight a shift from primarily oral to increasingly written communication to preserve important ideas. This section also marks a transition, beginning with the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah and ending with sacrifices being made according to the Book of Moses.

### **Prophecy and Promise**

Read Ezra 5:1–5. This section takes place between 520–518 BC and refers to The Book of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8. The work on rebuilding the temple had stopped. However, Haggai and Zechariah's preaching encouraged and motivated the people to resume work.

37. Read Haggai 1:12–14. How did the Lord’s promise “I am with you” (v. 13). encourage the people of Israel?
38. Read Matthew 28:18–20. What does Jesus promise to His disciples and to His Church?

## **The Letters**

During the reign of Darius I, Tattenai was the Persian provincial governor of the land lying west of the Euphrates River.

39. Read Ezra 5:6–17. What did Tattenai ask King Darius to do?

Read Ezra 6:1–12. Note that the evidence of Cyrus’s edict did not appear in Babylon, but in Ecbatana (vv. 1–2). Ecbatana was the summer residence of the Persian kings. This might indicate the time of year when Cyrus originally issued the decree. Ezra repeats Cyrus’s edict, which was first issued some twenty-five years earlier (vv. 3–5).

40. How did Darius respond to Tattenai’s letter (vv. 6–7)?

The Lord uses civil government to further His causes and purposes (Romans 13). The letters in Ezra 5–6 appeal to the government to decide matters related to the Lord’s Church.

41. How did the Lord work through King Darius to further His work and to provide for the children of Israel?

## **The Completion of the Temple**

Read Ezra 6:13–18. Note how Haggai and Zechariah’s preaching encouraged the people to return to the rebuilding of the temple. Although it was completed and dedicated during the reign of Darius (around 520–515 BC), verse 14 mentions the decree of “Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes.” Under Cyrus’s decree, the people returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple. Under Darius’s decree, work on the temple resumed. Artaxerxes is a future king. The narrator includes Artaxerxes in this verse because he will authorize continuation of the work. Thus, in addition to stirring up the hearts of His own people, the Lord stirred up the kings of Persia (Ezra 1:1–3).

42. Read Ezekiel 37:15–28. How did rebuilding the temple fulfill Ezekiel’s prophecy?
43. How did Christ fulfill this prophecy?

## **The Celebration of Passover**

Read Ezra 6:19–22. The Passover was first celebrated when the children of Israel were preparing to leave Egypt. It was celebrated once again by the children of Israel after being released from Persian captivity. This means that the Passover had not been celebrated by God’s people in at least seventy years.

44. Read Exodus 12:1–14. What was the Passover?
45. Why didn't the people of Israel celebrate the Passover while they were in captivity in Persia?
46. While celebrating the Passover feast with His disciples, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper (see Luke 22:7–21). How are the Passover and the Lord's Supper similar? How are they different?

### **God's Word for Today**

Just as Haggai and Zechariah's preaching encouraged the people of Israel, so too does the preaching of God's Word encourage us today. The Lord promises to be with us always (Matthew 28:18–20). Through His written, preached, and shared Word, through Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion, the Lord is with us. The people of Israel celebrated joyfully at the dedication of the temple and at the celebration of the Passover. Likewise we assemble in the Lord's house to receive His Holy Meal.

During the reign of communism in Russia, many Lutheran Christians were unable to receive Holy Communion for seventy years. These individuals were instructed and confirmed in the Lutheran faith as children. After communism fell, receiving the Sacrament became a possibility. In one instance, when a Lutheran pastor visited Russia, an elderly woman was finally able to receive the Lord's body and blood.

47. How might the joy the people of Israel felt at the first Passover in seventy years be similar to the joy this woman in Russia experienced?
48. How does the Lord give you joy?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Consider how the preaching of the Lord's promises encourages people in difficult life situations or provides them with the strength to live their daily lives.
- Ponder the Lord Jesus' sacramental presence in His body and blood in the Lord's Supper.
- Read Ezra 7-8 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together "O Lord, We Praise Thee" (*LSB* 617):

O Lord, we praise Thee, bless Thee, and adore Thee,  
In thanksgiving bow before Thee.  
Thou with Thy body and Thy blood didst nourish  
Our weak souls that they may flourish:  
O Lord, have mercy!  
May Thy body, Lord, born of Mary,  
That our sins and sorrows did carry,  
And Thy blood for us plead  
In all trial, fear, and need:  
O Lord, have mercy!

Thy holy body into death was given,  
Life to win for us in heaven.  
No greater love than this to Thee could bind us;  
May this feast thereof remind us!  
O Lord, have mercy!  
Lord, Thy kindness did so constrain Thee  
That Thy blood should bless and sustain me.  
All our debt Thou hast paid;  
Peace with God once more is made:  
O Lord, have mercy!

May God bestow on us His grace and favor  
That we follow Christ our Savior  
And live together here in love and union  
Nor despise this blest Communion!  
O Lord, have mercy!  
Let not Thy good Spirit forsake us;  
Grant that heav'nly-minded He make us;  
Give Thy Church, Lord, to see  
Days of peace and unity:  
O Lord, have mercy!

Pray: O Lord, in this wondrous Sacrament You have left us a remembrance of Your passion. Grant that we may so receive the sacred mystery of Your body and blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for Holy [Maundy] Thursday)

# Lesson 5

## Return of Ezra

This section of Ezra marks the second of the three waves of returning exiles recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. The first wave included those sent by Cyrus's decree (Ezra 1). The return of Ezra to Jerusalem marks the second wave, while the return of Nehemiah marks the third. Each of these demonstrates that the Lord is faithful to the promise He made to His people.

### Overview

Read Ezra 7:1–10. These verses give an overview of chapters 7–8. Verses 1–6 briefly present Ezra's credentials. Not every male Israelite was eligible to serve as a priest in the temple. Not every priest was eligible to serve as the high priest. The credentials for service were important because they confirmed that Ezra was the Lord's authorized representative. By knowing this, the people could be certain that they were hearing the Lord's Word. (For a list of Ezra's ancestors, see 1 Chronicles 6:4–14.)

49. Why was it important to know that a prophet was authorized to perform his duties?

Some scholars have suggested that Paul had the Book of Ezra in mind when he wrote Galatians. Commenting on Galatians, Luther wrote,

At the very outset Paul deals with those false teachers. They claimed to be the pupils of the apostles, sent by them; and they despised Paul as one who was neither the pupil of the apostles nor sent by them to preach the Gospel but had entered in some other way and had intruded himself upon the ministry on his own initiative. Against them Paul defends his calling. . . . my calling is not from men or through man; it is superior to any calling that can come after the apostles. For it is ‘through Jesus Christ and God the Father.’

(*Galatians*, 1535; AE 26:17)

50. Read Galatians 1:11–17 and Acts 22:1–3, 21. How were Ezra’s and Paul’s credentials, as taught in the Law, similar? Dissimilar?

Ezra was both a scribe and a priest. He was trained in the written Law. He knew the Old Testament Scriptures and their interpretation. Notice that Ezra was not called a *prophet*. He did not receive visions or dreams. He works with the written text. Ezra is also a priest, so he was able to perform priestly functions for the people and intercede for them. Ezra enjoyed the favor of both God and people. Among those was the Persian king Artaxerxes, who granted Ezra’s requests.

Ezra studied, practiced, and taught the Law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). The word “Law” can mean more than simply rules and regulations. The Hebrew word for *Law* is “Torah,” which means “instruction.” The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are known as the “Torah.” The Law is more than just the Ten Commandments. In addition to reading the Scriptures before the people, Ezra also offered commentary so that the people could understand. He “did” the Law of the Lord.

51. Read Matthew 23:2–3 and 1 Timothy 3:1–13. Why is it important that God’s spokesman live the life he preaches?
  
52. How are Ezra’s qualifications similar to the qualifications for a Christian pastor?

### **Authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah**

Thus far, we have not discussed the authorship of Ezra or Nehemiah, which are named after the primary characters in each book. The books contain their memoirs. Until Origen (ca. AD 185–254), the books were considered as one, with the center of the combined book found at Nehemiah 3:32. 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 is nearly identical with Ezra 1:1–3. This has led some to conclude the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles is the same as the author of Ezra and Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were not printed separately until the Middle Ages. Ezra and Nehemiah were written in both Aramaic and Hebrew, with the “letters” in Ezra being typically in Aramaic. Although Aramaic appears sporadically in the Old Testament, the only other major occurrence is in the Book of Daniel.

53. What significance might there be to the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra being almost identical?

## **Ezra's Sending**

Read Ezra 7:11–28.

54. What three roles or vocations did Ezra have (v. 11)?
  
55. How did King Artaxerxes serve as God's instrument? What did he provide to Ezra?
  
56. To what did Ezra attribute his success with the king?

## **The Return**

Read Ezra 8:1–14. The list of returning families represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The Lord was reestablishing His people in Jerusalem. Verse 2 describes the priests and the descendants of David. This is the lineage from which Christ will be born. Verses 3–14 describe the nonpriestly families.

57. Why might Ezra have reviewed the names of his fellow travelers?
  
58. Read Ezra 8:15–36. Ezra prayed to God and called a fast for a safe journey (vv. 21–23). Why did Ezra pray when he already knew that this journey was part of God's plan?

## God's Word for Today

The Lord was faithful to His promise by calling Ezra to return to Jerusalem to teach God's people His Law. It was not enough to merely gather His people in Jerusalem; they needed the guidance of a shepherd. Ezra stands in a long line of Old Testament prophets and leaders, such as Moses, who shepherded God's people. Ezra also prefigures the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who instructs His people in all things (see John 15:26; 16:13).

59. Read John 10:1–18. How is Jesus the pattern for all the Old Testament prophets? How is He the pattern for pastors today?
  
60. Read Ephesians 4:11–12. How was Ezra's work similar to what is described in Ephesians?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Read Psalm 19 and consider how it describes God's Law.
- Pray for your pastor and that the Lord would raise up more workers in His Church.
- Read Ezra 9–10 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “God of the Prophets, Bless the Prophets’ Sons” (*LSB* 682):

God of the prophets, bless the prophets’ sons;  
Elijah’s mantle o’er Elisha cast.  
Each age its solemn task may claim but once;  
Make each one nobler, stronger than the last.

Anoint them prophets, men who are intent  
To be Your witnesses in word and deed,  
Their hearts aflame, their lips made eloquent,  
Their eyes awake to ev’ry human need.

Anoint them priests, strong intercessors they,  
For pardon and for love and hope and peace,  
That, through their pleading, guilty sinners may  
Find Jesus’ mercy and from sin release.

Anoint them kings, yes, kingly kings, O Lord.  
Anoint them with the Spirit of Your Son.  
Theirs not a jeweled crown, a blood-stained sword;  
Theirs, by sweet love, for Christ a kingdom won.

Make them apostles, heralds of Your cross;  
Forth let them go to tell the world of grace.  
Inspired by You, may they count all but loss  
And stand at last with joy before Your face.

Pray: Almighty and gracious God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You have commanded us to pray that You would send forth laborers into Your harvest. Of Your infinite mercy give us true teachers and ministers of Your Word who truly fulfill Your command and preach nothing contrary to Your holy Word. Grant that we, being warned, instructed, nurtured, comforted, and strengthened by Your holy Word, may do those things which are well pleasing to You and profitable for our salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Collect for Increase of the holy ministry)

# Lesson 6

## Ezra's Reforms

Chapters 9–10 describe Ezra's reforms. Ezra was focused on his task. Despite his work, he did not see complete success in his reforms. In a day and age that seeks to list every accomplishment, Ezra's singular focus might seem disappointing. On the other hand, Ezra's tenacity and patience serves as a portrait of how the Lord single-mindedly pursues His people to save them. Ezra also serves as an example of a faithful pastor.

It did not take long before the returning exiles fell into familiar patterns of sin. Ezra seemed to be unaware of this until a few officials reported that some men were marrying foreign wives. Historically among the people of Israel, intermarriage with unbelievers generally led to idolatry and apostasy from the Lord. The people were now sinning in the same way that caused their captivity. Nevertheless, Ezra's preaching led them to confess their sins. They were absolved. Restored to the Lord through repentant faith, the people were enabled again to worship Him.

61. Read Ezra 9–10. How did Ezra approach the problem of intermarriage with unbelievers?

### **Ezra's Grief Over Sin**

In Exodus 13:5 and 23:20–33, the Lord commanded His people to forsake intermarriage with the people of the land they were

overtaking. Ironically, the people mentioned in Exodus were the same people the priests and Levites had married (Ezra 9:1–2).

62. Why did the Lord warn His people not to make a covenant with the people of the land?

Read 1 Kings 11:1–13. Soon after the temple dedication in Jerusalem by Solomon, we see Solomon doing the very things the Lord had forbidden.

63. What evil in God’s eyes did Solomon do?
64. For Solomon’s sin, what punishment did the Lord threaten? How is this connected to the Babylonian captivity and the Book of Ezra?

In Deuteronomy 4:24–27, the Lord told His people what would happen if they worshiped carved images and idols. The Lord threatened that they would “utterly perish” and be “utterly destroyed.” Luther writes,

You will note especially that God is described by Moses as a fire and a Jealous One in connection with the First Commandment. . . . He Himself stresses most strongly, namely, that He is to be our God, so that we set up no confidence in works but trust in His mercy alone.

*(Deuteronomy; AE 9:59)*

65. Why did Ezra tear his robes (Ezra 9:1–4)?

## Ezra's Prayer

Read Ezra 9:5–15. Ezra prayed the Scriptures back to the Lord. In verse 6, Ezra prays Psalm 38:4. In verse 7, he prays Psalm 106:6. In verse 8, he prays Isaiah 22:23 and Psalm 13:3. In verse 13, he prays Psalm 103:10, which echoes Deuteronomy 4:31. Look up these passages and see how they fit into Ezra's prayer.

66. How did Ezra's prayer life benefit from being "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6)?

Note verse 9 of Ezra's prayer. The ESV says, "give us *protection* in Judea and Jerusalem." The Hebrew word for *protection* literally means "wall." This play on words connects the end of Ezra to the Book of Nehemiah, which is concerned with the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem. Ezra's prayer could be a double entendre, whereby Ezra prays both for protection *and* for a wall.

Read Isaiah 5:2, 5. The Laws regarding marriage to foreign women were part of the "hedge" or "wall" described in Isaiah 5:5. When the Lord sent His people into captivity, what He prophesied in verse 5 came to pass. On this Luther writes,

The Jews had a twofold kingdom, civil and spiritual. The spiritual kingdom was gone when in Babylon they did not have their temple worship or sacrifice. The political kingdom, too, had been laid waste at that time, though not wiped out. However, both were taken away from them by the Romans after Christ.

(*Isaiah*; AE 16:59–60)

Ezra prayed for that "hedge" or "wall" to be restored.

Read Genesis 18:22–33; Exodus 32:30–32; and John 17:9, 20–21.

67. What did Abraham, Moses, Ezra, and Jesus all do?
68. How are we benefited by Jesus, as both God and man, praying for us?

### **The People Confess Their Sin**

69. Read Ezra 10:1–17. What did the people do when they saw Ezra weeping?
70. How many days did it take for the heads of households to assemble (compare v. 9b to v. 16b)? How many months did it take for them to determine the men who had married foreign women (compare v. 16b to v. 17)?
71. Read verses 18–44. What did those guilty of intermarriage do?

### **God's Word for Today**

Ezra's concern over intermarriage seems unimaginable in our day. Yet throughout Israel's history, intermarriage with unbelievers led to idolatry. In part, Israelite men were forbidden to marry foreign women to set them apart as God's people.

72. In general, should we be concerned about *marriage* today?

The other great theme of this section is Confession and Absolution. Every Sunday in worship, we confess that we are “by nature sinful and unclean.” Then we hear the Absolution: “Almighty God . . . forgives you all your sins. . . . As a called and ordained servant of Christ . . . I forgive you all your sins.”

73. How does Confession and Absolution, whether public or private, help you live your life during the week?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Memorize the section on Confession and Absolution in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism.
- Begin to use the Psalms as a basis for your prayer life. Pick a psalm and incorporate it into your prayer as Ezra did.
- Read Nehemiah 1–2 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “I Lay My Sins on Jesus” (*LSB* 606):

I lay my sins on Jesus,  
The spotless Lamb of God;  
He bears them all and frees us  
From the accursed load.  
I bring my guilt to Jesus  
To wash my crimson stains  
Clean in His blood most precious  
Till not a spot remains.

I lay my wants on Jesus;  
All fullness dwells in Him;  
He heals all my diseases;  
My soul He does redeem.  
I lay my griefs on Jesus,  
My burdens and my cares;  
He from them all releases;  
He all my sorrows shares.

I rest my soul on Jesus,  
This weary soul of mine;  
His right hand me embraces;  
I on His breast recline.  
I love the name of Jesus,  
Immanuel, Christ, the Lord;  
Like fragrance on the breezes  
His name abroad is poured.

Pray: Almighty, everlasting God, for our many sins we justly deserve eternal condemnation. In Your mercy You sent Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who won for us forgiveness of sins and everlasting salvation. Grant us a true confession that, dead to sin, we may be raised up by Your life-giving absolution. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may be ever watchful and live true and godly lives in Your service; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Collect before confession and absolution)

# Lesson 7

## Return of Nehemiah

In 445 BC, King Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah, his trusted cup-bearer, to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes favored both Ezra and Nehemiah. When Nehemiah heard about the plight of his people, he became melancholy and felt he must do something. Nehemiah was especially disturbed that Jerusalem's walls were in ruin; perhaps he was also disturbed because he lived in the fortified city of Susa, which served as the capitol of Persia. (Susa is mentioned in Esther 1:2, 5; 2:3, 5.) Nehemiah prayed to the Lord. He also made use of the civil position the Lord granted him to benefit his people.

Nehemiah obtained permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was part of the third wave of returnees. He became the governor of the area. In many ways, Nehemiah is a continuation of the story that began in the Book of Ezra.

74. How was Nehemiah's family background similar to Ezra's? Different?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
75. How was Nehemiah's professional background similar to Ezra's? Different?

## Nehemiah's Awakening

Read Nehemiah 1:1–3. The Hebrew month of *Chislev* (see Zechariah 7:1) corresponds to mid-November to December on our calendar. Hanukkah (or the Festival of Lights) occurs during Kislev, although this festival did not originate until about 280 years after Nehemiah, during the time of the Maccabees (ca. 165 BC).

Nehemiah was raised in a faithful family. He knew the history of his people and why they ended up in captivity. When his brother visited him, he asked how the reconstruction of Jerusalem was going. Nehemiah certainly knew how the Babylonians destroyed the walls of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:10). Perhaps Nehemiah heard or remembered the events described in Ezra 4:11–22, when opponents hindered the work of rebuilding. Nehemiah was moved to prayer. When tragedy or a special need arises, God's people pray.

Read Nehemiah 1:4–11. Nehemiah's prayer reflects the liturgical language of Deuteronomy. This is similar to how Ezra prayed in the previous section. Liturgical prayer is formed by Scripture; it is saying back to God what He has first said to us. This prayer forms the basis of Nehemiah's mission, as we will see in Nehemiah 2.

76. Why did Nehemiah begin to pray confessing the sins of the people as well as his own?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
77. Why did Nehemiah remind the Lord about His words to Moses? (Review Deuteronomy 4:25–27.)

## **Nehemiah Goes to Jerusalem**

Read Nehemiah 2:1–8. Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah was downcast. See Proverbs 15:13. Note that the queen was at the side of the king; see Psalm 45:9.

78. Nehemiah asked the king permission to do three things. What were they?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
79. Compare Nehemiah 2:8 with Ezra 7:6. What did Ezra and Nehemiah have in common?

## **Nehemiah Inspects the Walls**

Read Nehemiah 2:9–20. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with letters from the king. He was not merely a tourist or a private citizen, but he had the king's authority to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. The governors of the land were not happy to see Nehemiah. To understand why, look at Jonah 4:1. In this passage, Jonah was upset because the Lord showed mercy to the Assyrians, who were enemies of Israel and who eventually were conquered by the Babylonians. In Nehemiah, the people of the land, perhaps Samaritans, were unhappy that the Lord was showing mercy and favor to the returned Israelites. After Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he rested for three days (see Ezra 8:32).

80. Of what does Nehemiah's three-day rest remind you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
81. Why did Nehemiah inspect the city at night (Nehemiah 2:13–15)?

82. Why didn't Nehemiah tell anyone about his inspection (see Nehemiah 9:2)?
83. Why did Nehemiah want to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah 2:16–17)?

### **God's Word for Today**

Nehemiah was concerned about his people and the city of Jerusalem. He knew about God's promises to His people. Because the walls were in ruin, Nehemiah saw that the Lord's promise was not yet fulfilled. He trusted in God's gracious hand to provide.

84. Read Acts 22:24–29. How did God use Paul's Roman citizenship and his training as a tentmaker to further the work of the Gospel?
85. How might the Lord use you to further the Gospel?

### **In Closing**

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Learn the Lord's Prayer and its explanation in Martin Luther's Small Catechism.
- Think how the Lord might use you in your vocation to further His work.

- Read Nehemiah 3-4 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “Jerusalem, My Happy Home” (*LSB* 673):

Jerusalem, my happy home,  
When shall I come to thee?  
When shall my sorrows have an end?  
Thy joys, when shall I see?

O happy harbor of the saints,  
O sweet and pleasant soil!  
In thee no sorrow may be found,  
No grief, no care, no toil.

Thy gardens and thy gallant walks  
Continually are green;  
There grow such sweet and pleasant flow'rs  
As nowhere else are seen.

There trees forevermore bear fruit  
And evermore do spring;  
There evermore the angels dwell  
And evermore do sing.

Apostles, martyrs, prophets, there  
Around my Savior stand;  
And soon my friends in Christ below  
Will join the glorious band.

O Christ, do Thou my soul prepare  
For that bright home of love  
That I may see Thee and adore  
With all Thy saints above.

Pray: Gracious Lord and Shepherd, grant to those entrusted with special responsibilities zeal and faithfulness to perform the task of building up Your Church, bringing glory to Your saving name; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for those who have particular responsibility in the Church)

# Lesson 8

## Rebuilding the Wall

This section evokes a familiar cycle: work is begun, opposition arises, and the work resumes. This cycle has been repeated several times in Ezra and Nehemiah. In some ways, it reflects our experience in life. We begin a project, something comes up to stop it, then we resume work and complete the job. The people in Jerusalem must have been frustrated at times. Perhaps some even wondered if the Lord was still on their side. However, despite the opposition, the city walls were rebuilt. The Lord was faithful to His promise. The city gained protection from her enemies.

Nehemiah 3–4 describes the rebuilding of the walls and the gates. It also lists the individuals and families who partook in the rebuilding. Note that chapter 3 begins with the work of the priests and ends with the work of the goldsmiths (v. 32). Again, the efforts of all these individuals show how the Lord stirred up His people to restore Jerusalem.

### **Overview of the Rebuilding**

At first, Nehemiah 3 appears to be a rather tedious description of the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls and gates. This chapter is narrated in the third person and Nehemiah is not even mentioned by name. In fact, the detailed description of Jerusalem and its surroundings are largely lost to the contemporary reader. And yet, this chapter provides one of the most detailed descriptions of Jerusalem in Bible times. The description of the rebuilding begins at the north wall of the city, which is closest to the temple, and

goes around the walls counterclockwise. Nehemiah 3:1–15 describes the repair of the northern and western walls, while verses 16–32 describe the repair of the eastern wall.

The rebuilding of the walls had a military purpose, but it also had a spiritual purpose. The walls separated the people of Israel from the surrounding peoples of the land. In Nehemiah 13:19–22, Nehemiah orders the gates closed on the Sabbath to keep the city free of pagan influences. The rebuilding of the walls also showed a reversal of Israel’s humiliation from its captivity. Nehemiah also organized the community (from the high priest and the priests to the skilled laborers and so on) to participate in the rebuilding of the walls. It seems that women were also involved in the rebuilding of the walls (Nehemiah 3:12). This chapter also highlights the rebuilding of the community.

<b>Gate</b>	<b>v.</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Sheep Gate	1, 31	On north wall of city, closest to temple. This gate probably has its name because the sheep for the sacrifice were brought through it.
Fish Gate	3	Also called the Ephraim Gate (Nehemiah 8:16; 12:39; 2 Kings 14:13) and the Middle Gate (Jeremiah 39:3). There was probably a fish market located here.
Yeshanah Gate	6	This is the gate to the old city or to the second district of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:39).
Valley Gate	13	
Dung Gate	13	
Fountain Gate	15	
Water Gate	26	This gate led to the Gihon Spring.

Horse Gate	28	Mentioned in Jeremiah 31:40.
East Gate	29	The East Gate to the Lord's house (Ezekiel 10:19).
Muster Gate	31	Also called the Inspection Gate or Watch Gate.

86. Read Nehemiah 3–4. How do these two chapters show that Nehemiah was a skilled leader and administrator?
87. Why was it important that the community was rebuilt along with the temple and the city walls?

Besides Nehemiah's ability to persuade the community to rally behind a common cause, the involvement of the priests indicates a religious aspect: the rebuilding of the walls as the fulfillment of the Word spoken by Jeremiah the prophet and mentioned at the beginning of Ezra.

88. Why do you suppose rebuilding the gates was so important?
89. The priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate. Read 1 Kings 8:62–66. How did Solomon consecrate his buildings?

90. Read John 5:1–9. What miracle did Jesus perform near the Sheep Gate?
91. Read Jeremiah 31:38 and Zechariah 14:10. What do these passages tell us about the rebuilding of the wall and gates?

### **Opposition to Work**

Read Nehemiah 4:1–14. Sanballat angrily insulted God’s people. His insults were aimed not only against the Israelites, but also against God. Nehemiah prayed for the Lord to respond (vv. 4–5; see also Psalm 69:27–28; 79:12; 109:14–15; 123:3–4; and Jeremiah 18:23). Nehemiah drew his words from Scripture.

92. Why did Nehemiah make this a matter between his opponents and the Lord?
93. Read verse 14 along with Numbers 14:9 and Deuteronomy 1:29; 7:21; 10:17. How did Nehemiah comfort the people?

### **The Work Resumes**

Read Nehemiah 4:15–23.

94. Whom did Nehemiah credit with frustrating the plans of Sanballat?

95. The sound of the trumpet and the song “Our God will fight for us” rallied the people to resume work (Nehemiah 4:20). See also Exodus 14:14, 25; Deuteronomy 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; and Joshua 23:10. What, through His Word and promises, is the Lord encouraging you to do?

## **God’s Word for Today**

Details about an ancient city wall being rebuilt may be difficult for us to relate to. Considering that so few people returned from exile to rebuild the city, perhaps the Israelites themselves had a hard time relating to it, too. However, we can relate to ridicule and discouragement. We can also relate to the Lord’s promises encouraging us and inspiring us for service.

96. Do you think that the Lord still frustrates the plans of the wicked? Why or why not? Provide some examples.
97. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. How did the Lord’s plans in Nehemiah’s day seem foolish? How is Christ’s cross foolishness to the world, but God’s wisdom to believers?

## **In Closing**

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- In the manner of Nehemiah, encourage a person by speaking to him or her about the promises of the Lord.
- Memorize the explanation to “Deliver us from evil” from Martin Luther’s Small Catechism.

- Read Nehemiah 5–7 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “Who Trusts in God a Strong Abode”  
(LSB 714):

Who trusts in God A strong abode  
In heav’n and earth possesses;  
Who looks in love To Christ above,  
No fear that heart oppresses.  
In You alone, Dear Lord, we own  
Sweet hope and consolation,  
Our shield from foes, Our balm for woes,  
Our great and sure salvation.

Though Satan’s wrath Beset our path  
And worldly scorn assail us,  
While You are near, We shall not fear;  
Your strength will never fail us.  
Your rod and staff Will keep us safe  
And guide our steps forever;  
Nor shades of death Nor hell beneath  
Our lives from You will sever.

In all the strife Of mortal life  
Our feet will stand securely;  
Temptation’s hour Will lose its pow’r,  
For You will guard us surely.  
O God, renew With heav’nly dew  
Our body, soul, and spirit  
Until we stand At Your right hand  
Through Jesus’ saving merit.

Pray: Almighty and ever-living God, You make us both to will and to do those things that are good and acceptable in Your sight. Let Your fatherly hand ever guide us and Your Holy Spirit ever be with us to direct us in the knowledge and obedience of Your Word that we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Collect for divine guidance)

# Lesson 9

## Internal and External Problems

Soon after Nehemiah addressed the immediate problem of the wall, he was confronted with additional problems—both internally and externally. Workers encountered issues that would hinder the rebuilding of the city. They needed someone to help. If Nehemiah lost the favor and confidence of the people, the work would stop. In addition, Nehemiah’s enemies plotted against him. Their goal was to stop Nehemiah by hurting his reputation and perhaps also by forcing him to leave Jerusalem—or even by killing him.

Because the Lord’s favor was upon him, Nehemiah navigated the internal and external threats he faced. Nehemiah was able to institute reforms and avoid the plots of his enemies. This section closes with a list of those who returned from exile.

### **Nehemiah Stops Oppression**

Read Nehemiah 5:1–13. Over the past one hundred years, numerous books and articles have been written on this passage. Some authors seem almost uncomfortable with Nehemiah’s reforms and feel that they are primarily left-hand kingdom (secular) acts that the Church has little business being involved in. Others see current social injustice issues represented in Nehemiah’s reforms, even though those issues did not exist in Nehemiah’s day. Those taking this view believe the Church should not only be involved in social issues, but also is mandated by God to correct the injustices of the world. There are others who fall between these extremes. With the rise of corporate business culture, some find the first six chap-

ters of Nehemiah, and chapter 5 in particular, as applicable to the Christian businessperson or the Christian leader. Thus Nehemiah becomes the model for leadership.

A more balanced approach may be to recognize that Nehemiah was a man to whom God had given many gifts and talents. We should not suggest that following Nehemiah's methods will lead to success. The Lord has given us the stories of His people so that we can learn from them, as sinners and saints, and be encouraged in our faith. Chief among those lessons should be Nehemiah's example of unwavering trust in the promises of the Lord.

98. Describe the outcry and its cause (Nehemiah 5:1–5). Did it only involve the stuff of everyday life or was there a spiritual component?
99. Read Acts 6:1–7. How was the conflict similar to the issues in this passage?

The people were numerous and needed grain (Nehemiah 5:2). Some more recent commentators have used this passage to advocate family planning to limit the family size, so that there is not a shortage of food and resources. This is an application of the text not envisioned by Nehemiah. The Israelites' problem was not too many people, but too little food. The Lord had promised to give them the land and to give them children to inherit the land.

Verses 3–5 show that the people's problem was caused by a constellation of events: (1) The city, which had not been fully rebuilt, was not yet fully able to provide the necessary goods and services for the people. (2) A famine was in the land; crops were not growing in abundance. (3) The relatively few people who returned from exile had been richly blessed by the Lord with

children. (4) The people were selling crops and mortgaging their fields in part to counter the charge of their enemies who claimed that once the walls were rebuilt, the king would not receive any more taxes (see Ezra 4:13, 20; 7:24). (5) The people having material wealth were not using it to help their neighbor as commanded by the Law (Leviticus 25:35–37; Deuteronomy 15:7). (6) Jews were purchasing other Jews as slaves (Note that this sort of problem had happened before in Israel; 2 Kings 4:1). Consider also the following passages.

**Usury and Interest:**

Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36; Psalm 15:5; Ezekiel 22:12

**Slavery of One's Own People:**

Exodus 21:7; Leviticus 25:39, 48–49

100. How do these passages help us better understand the dis-sension of the people? Read Nehemiah 5:6–13.
  
101. Read Nehemiah 5:6–13. What does Nehemiah show the people in order to persuade them to alter their behavior in verse 12?
  
102. Look at the end of verse 12 and the beginning of verse 13. Read also Ezra 10:5. Why did Nehemiah call the priests? To whom were the people swearing and to whom did they pledge?

Read the last part of verse 13. This serves as a basis for the popular American evangelical saying: “And all the people said, ‘Amen.’” To better understand the context of this passage, read the following: Deuteronomy 27:15; 1 Chronicles 16:36; Nehemiah 8:6; and Psalm 106:48. In Deuteronomy 27:14–26, the phrase occurs twelve times. In Deuteronomy 27, a curse is pronounced on anyone who breaks a particular commandment, then all the people say, “Amen.” “Amen” means “Yes, it shall be so.” So in this context, the “Amen” spoken by the people affirms a curse. In Nehemiah 5:13, the usage is similar. Nehemiah calls for the Lord to “shake out” every man who does not keep his promise. It is a curse against those who break their promise.

103. Compare and contrast how this phrase was used in Nehemiah’s day to how it is used today.

Read Nehemiah 5:14–19 and compare it with Ezra 7:10. Also read 1 Corinthians 9. According to Persian custom, Nehemiah as governor had the right to collect taxes to support himself and his administration of the province.

104. What do we see about Nehemiah’s character?

105. Read Nehemiah 6:1–14. In chapter 4, Nehemiah’s enemies wanted to use violence against him. What is their plan now?

106. Read Nehemiah 6:15–7:4. What effect did the completion of the wall have on Israel’s enemies?

Read Nehemiah 7:5–73. Review the introductory material on the Lists in Ezra and Nehemiah. This list is identical with the list found in Ezra 2.

107. Why are these lists important in the story of Ezra and Nehemiah?

### **God’s Word for Today**

This section of Nehemiah presents so many possible applications, it is difficult to limit them. While the Old Testament Israelite civil law may no longer apply to Christians, we still have reason to love our neighbor. Just as the Old Testament Law expressed concern for the fellow Israelite (laws against usury and slavery and a command to help fellow Israelites), New Testament Christians are commanded to love their neighbor.

108. How does being a member of the Body of Christ affect how you respond to the needs of fellow Christians?

109. What effect can a Christian witness have on the world?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Show a concrete act of mercy to your neighbor.
- Begin using Bible cross references to sharpen your understanding of the context of Bible passages.
- Read Nehemiah 8–10 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “If God Himself Be for Me” (*LSB* 724:1–2, 8, 10):

If God Himself be for me,  
I may a host defy;  
For when I pray, before me  
My foes, confounded, fly.  
If Christ, my head and master,  
Befriend me from above,  
What foe or what disaster  
Can drive me from His love?

I build on this foundation,  
That Jesus and His blood  
Alone are my salvation,  
My true, eternal good.  
Without Him all that pleases  
Is valueless on earth;  
The gifts I have from Jesus  
Alone have priceless worth.

No danger, thirst, or hunger,  
No pain or poverty,  
No earthly tyrant's anger  
Shall ever vanquish me.  
Though earth should break asunder,  
My fortress You shall be;  
No fire or sword or thunder  
Shall sever You from me.

My heart with joy is springing;  
I am no longer sad.  
My soul is filled with singing;  
Your sunshine makes me glad.  
The sun that cheers my spirit  
Is Jesus Christ, my King;  
The heav'n I shall inherit  
Makes me rejoice and sing.

Pray: Look mercifully, O Lord, we implore You, on the affliction of Your people. Let not our sin destroy us, nor hopelessness overwhelm us, but let Your boundless mercy save us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Collect for National Calamity)

# Lesson 10

## Restoration of the Divine Service

In Ezra 3, we read about the people of Israel gathering at the Water Gate to rebuild the temple altar. In Nehemiah 8, a similar gathering occurs, but for a different reason: the people wanted Ezra to read the Book of the Law to them. Instead of reform coming from the top down, this time it came up from the people. With the completion of the city wall, the people of Israel were thankful to the Lord. They wanted to keep the feasts of thanksgiving and the new moon festivals, but they needed to be instructed from the Book of Moses. The people wanted to be sure that their worship was pleasing to the Lord and done according to His will.

At the beginning of Nehemiah 8, only four or five days had passed since the people completed rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. With its completion, the people were eager to hear the Word of the Lord and to give Him thanks. The people gathered together around the Word of God.

110. How did God's Word of promise liberate His people in Nehemiah's day? How does it do so today?
111. Read Nehemiah 8:1. Why did the people become as "one man?" What unified them?

## **Ezra Reads the Law**

Read Nehemiah 8:2–8. The people requested to hear the Law read, in keeping with Deuteronomy 31:11. Ezra did not simply read the Law, he expounded on it.

112. Read Acts 8:26–31. Does the Word of God need interpretation in order to be effective? Why or why not?
113. Why is it a blessing to have someone explain God's Word (Nehemiah 8:2–8)?

## **A Holy Day and the Feast of Booths**

114. Read Nehemiah 8:9–12. Why were the people weeping?

Read Leviticus 23:24 and Numbers 29:1. The Levites encouraged the people to stop weeping in order to celebrate all the Lord had done to save them. The theme was triumphant and glorious.

In Old Testament times and in our own, religious seasons and festivals help us to focus on various aspects of our spiritual lives. The different seasons of the Church Year allow us to highlight events in the life of Jesus and in the life of the Church. Each season has a different mood. Some are joyful, while others are repentant. This variety also allows us to be human. People do not live their lives always high-spirited or always depressed; there is an ebb and flow to life. The Church seasons help reflect this.

The seasons of the Church are Advent, a time of preparation; Christmas, a time of joy and celebration; Epiphany, a time of

hope in the light of Christ; Lent, a time for repentance and confession; Easter, a time of celebration; Pentecost, also called ordinary time, when we focus on the life of the Church.

115. What are some of the benefits of having seasons in the Church Year?

116. Read Leviticus 23:34–43. What is the Feast of Booths? Why weren't the people in Ezra and Nehemiah's day familiar with it?

Read John 7:1–15. Jesus celebrated the Feast of Booths to fulfill the Law. In John 7:15, the Jews noted that Jesus had not studied and were amazed at His words. This calls to mind how the Jews marveled at Jesus when he was a twelve-year-old boy in the temple (Luke 2:41–52).

### **The People of Israel Confess Their Sins**

Read Nehemiah 9.

117. How did the Israelites publicly express their repentance? How do we publicly express repentance today?

In verse 6 and following, the deeds the Lord had done for Israel are recounted. The Lord made the heavens and the earth. He chose Abraham and called him from the land of Ur (Genesis). The Lord saw the affliction of His people in Egypt and delivered them across the Red Sea (Exodus). Despite all these great deeds,

the children of Israel were stiff-necked and disobedient (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The opening up of the Promised Land was retold (Judges). The Israelites killed the prophets and committed idolatry (1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and the Prophets). Yet the Lord, in His great mercy, did not forsake His people (Ezra and Nehemiah). The people spoke to the Lord the words He gave them. They recalled the Lord's salvation history of His people. They confessed their sin; that is, they spoke to the Lord what He had spoken to them in His Word.

118. What are some important reasons for “repeating” God’s Word?

### **Sealing of the Covenant**

In Chapter 10, the names of those who sealed the covenant mentioned in Nehemiah 9:38 are given. These people formed the basis of the community of the people of God. Although it might appear as if the people are making a pledge to the Lord to gain His favor, the reality is that the people are responding to the Lord’s mercy. The Lord had chosen them as His people. In response, the people make a covenant that they will live as the Lord’s people and keep His Law.

119. Is the covenant a new covenant or an old covenant?

### **God’s Word for Today**

The heart of worship is faith: to hear the Lord’s Word and then say it back to Him. This is also the heart of confession, where we confess our sins, receive God’s absolution, and confess our God-given faith in word and deed.

120. Read Luke 7:36–50. How is the sinful woman’s contrition similar to the contrition shown by the people of Israel in Nehemiah 9:6–38?

The highest form of worship is to receive forgiveness from Christ (Apology of the Augsburg Confession III 42). Whenever we receive forgiveness in repentant faith, we are worshipping Jesus.

121. How is worship more about what the Lord does for us than what we do for Him?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- During the Confession of sins in worship, consider how that is agreeing with or same-saying the Lord.
- Review the Psalms and note how much of Old Testament praise is repetition of God’s gracious deeds.
- Read Nehemiah 11–13 to prepare for the next section.

Sing or read together “May We Thy Precepts, Lord, Fulfill” (*LSB* 698):

May we Thy precepts, Lord fulfill  
And do on earth our Father’s will  
As angels do above;  
Still walk in Christ, the living way,  
With all Thy children and obey  
The law of Christian love.

So may we join Thy name to bless,  
Thy grace adore, Thy pow'r confess,  
From sin and strife to flee.  
One is our calling, one our name,  
The end of all our hopes the same,  
A crown of life with Thee.

Spirit of life, of love and peace,  
Unite our hearts, our joy increase,  
Thy gracious help supply.  
To each of us the blessing give  
In Christian fellowship to live,  
In joyful hope to die.

Pray: Lord, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells. In the multitude of Your tender mercies prepare my heart that I may enter Your house to worship and confess Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, my God and Lord. Amen. (Collect on Entering a church)

# Lesson 11

## Nehemiah's Final Acts

The final three chapters of Nehemiah describe events that occurred during his term as governor and his final reforms. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem was restored, lost books of the Scriptures were rediscovered, and divine worship resumed. The Israelites seemed to have been cured of idolatry as they rejected the false gods of the people who lived in the land. The Lord accomplished much through these two men.

Nehemiah 12:44–13:31 describe Nehemiah's second sojourn to Jerusalem, after he returned from Babylon. Many of Nehemiah's final reforms were the reinstitutions of reforms he had completed during his term as governor of Judah. This shows us that work in the Church is never finished. There will always be sinners who are brought to repentance; there is always need of Confession and Absolution. This is what Luther summarizes on Holy Baptism in the Small Catechism, that our sins daily must be drowned and put to death and a new man rise up to live in God's presence forever.

### **The Lists Showing What the Lord Did through Nehemiah**

Read Nehemiah 11:1–24. All of the lists in this section are connected to the list and genealogy Nehemiah prepared. The census in Nehemiah 7:5 was to record the population of the city. Upon the completion of the walls, another census needed to be taken. The goal here was to have one resident in Jerusalem for every ten in the surrounding area. The people responded willingly (Nehemiah 11:2; see also Judges 5:2, 9).

122. Why did Nehemiah need to repopulate the city? Why couldn't he invite anyone living in the area to inhabit Jerusalem?

Notice that Jerusalem is called the “holy city” in Nehemiah 11:1, 18. This is the first time that Jerusalem was called the “holy city.” Read Joel 3:17 and Isaiah 48:2. These texts prophesied that Jerusalem would be a holy city.

123. How did Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms help turn Jerusalem into a holy city?

124. Read Nehemiah 12:27–43. Why did the dedication of the wall bring the people of Israel such great joy (v. 43)?

### **Service at the Temple**

Read Nehemiah 12:44–47. Note that the events that follow occur during Nehemiah's second sojourn in Jerusalem. He returned to the king in Babylon for a time and had now come back to Jerusalem. This is, in a sense, part two of Nehemiah's work.

125. Why did Nehemiah have to reinstitute service at the temple?

## **Nehemiah's Final Reforms**

126. Read Nehemiah 13. What did Nehemiah have to do (v. 3)? Hadn't he already done this?
127. In connection with verses 10–14, read 2 Chronicles 31:4 and Malachi 3:8. What had not happened while Nehemiah was gone?
128. Read 1 Corinthians 9:8–14. How is this connected to Nehemiah 13:10–14? What are some applications for today?
129. Read Nehemiah 13:29–31. What had Nehemiah accomplished? How does this show the Lord's faithfulness to His promise?

## **God's Word for Today**

After Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, a scrap of paper was found on which he had written, among other things, "We are beggars." Luther's point was that before the Lord God, we can make no demands. All we can do is hold out our hand like a beggar, knowing that He will put something good into our hand as He has promised to do. Consider Luther's comment about beggars with the final words of Nehemiah, in chapter 13 (v. 31).

130. How can Nehemiah’s “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Nehemiah 13:31) be understood in light of Luther’s comment?
131. Read 1 Corinthians 3:9 and Ephesians 2:19–21. How might these passages relate to Ezra and Nehemiah? How has this study reinforced your understanding that we are God’s temple, anchored by the cornerstone of Christ?

## In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Remember in prayer those who work in the Church.
- Make use of something you learned from Ezra and Nehemiah and put it into practice in your life.
- Pray that the Lord will continue to make His Word fruitful among His people.

Sing or read together “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates” (*LSB* 340:1–3):

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates!  
Behold, the King of glory waits.  
The King of kings is drawing near;  
The Savior of the world is here.  
Life and salvation He doth bring;  
Therefore rejoice and gladly sing.  
To God the Father raise  
Your joyful songs of praise.

A righteous Helper comes to thee;  
His chariot is humility,  
His kingly crown is holiness,  
His scepter, pity in distress.  
The end of all our woe He brings;  
Therefore the earth is glad and sings.  
To Christ the Savior raise  
Your grateful hymns of praise.

How blest the land, the city blest,  
Where Christ the ruler is confessed!  
O peaceful hearts and happy homes  
To whom this King in triumph comes!  
The cloudless sun of joy is He  
Who comes to set His people free.  
To God the Spirit raise  
Your happy shouts of praise.

Pray: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by  
Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly  
lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the  
Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

# Leader Notes

To prepare to lead this study, read through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. You might review a good commentary on the book or read the introduction to the books in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, or a Bible handbook. Several maps of the ancient Near East at about 500 BC, including Babylon and Persia as well as the city of Jerusalem, would also help.

These notes are provided as a “safety net,” a place to turn for help in answering questions and for enriching discussion. They will not answer every question raised in your class. Please read them, along with the questions, before class. Consult them in class only after exploring the Bible references and discussing what they teach. Please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the Bible passages listed in this study; others will struggle. To make participation easier, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so on. Divide the work! Let participants present the answers they discover.

The materials in these notes are designed to help you in leading others through this portion of the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, this booklet is to be an aid to and not a substitute for your own study of and preparation for teaching the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

If you have the opportunity, you will find it helpful to make use of other biblical reference works in the course of your study. The following commentaries can be very helpful: John F. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, People’s Bible Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005); Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987); and F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemi-*

ah, *The International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982). Although it is not strictly a commentary, the section on Ezra and Nehemiah in *The Word Becoming Flesh* by Horace Hummel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979) also contains much that is of value for the proper interpretation of this biblical book.

## Group Bible Study

Group Bible study means mutual learning from one another under the guidance of a leader. The Bible is an inexhaustible resource. No one person can discover all it has to offer. In a class, many eyes see many things and can apply them to many life situations. As the leader, you should resist the temptation to “give the answers” and so act as an “authority.” This teaching approach stifles participation by individual members and can actually hamper learning. As a general rule, the teacher is not to *give* interpretation but to *develop* interpreters. Of course, there are times when you should and must share insights and information gained by your study and by your class members through the lesson. And you’ll want to engage class members in meaningful sharing and discussion at all points, leading them to a summary of the lesson at the close. As a general rule, don’t explain what the learners can discover by themselves.

Have a chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and marker available to emphasize significant points of the lesson. Rephrase your inquiries or the inquiries of participants as questions, problems, or issues. This provokes thought. Keep discussion to the point. List on the chalkboard or newsprint the answers given. Then determine the most vital points made in the discussion. Ask additional questions to fill gaps.

The aim of every Bible study is to help people grow spiritually, not merely in biblical and theological knowledge, but also in Christian thinking and living. This means growth in Christian attitudes, insights, and skills for Christian living. The focus of this

course must be the Church and the world of our day. The guiding question will be this: What does the Lord teach us for life today through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah?

## **Teaching the Old Testament**

Teaching the Old Testament can degenerate into mere moralizing in which do-goodism becomes a substitute for the Gospel and sanctification gets confused with justification. Actually, the justified sinner is not moved by Law but by God's grace to a totally new life. His or her faith in Christ is always at work in every context of life. Meaningful personal Christianity consists of faith flowing from God's grace and is evidenced in love for other people. Having experienced God's free grace and forgiveness, the Christian daily works in his or her world to reflect the will of God for humanity in every area of human endeavor.

The Christian leader is Gospel-oriented, not Law-oriented. He or she distinguishes Law from Gospel. Both are needed. There is no clear Gospel unless we first have been crushed by the Law and see our sinfulness. There is no genuine Christianity where faith is not followed by life pleasing to God. In fact, genuine faith is inseparable from life. The Gospel alone creates in us the new heart that causes us to love God and our neighbor.

When Christians teach the Old Testament, they do not teach it as a "Law book," but instead as books containing both Law and Gospel. They see the God of the Old Testament as a God of grace, who out of love establishes a covenant of love with His people (Deuteronomy 7:6–9) and forgives their sins. Christians interpret the Old Testament using the New Testament message of fulfilled prophecy through Jesus Christ. They teach as leaders who personally know the Lord Jesus as Savior, the victorious Christ who gives all believers a new life (2 Corinthians 5:17) and a new mission (John 20:21).

## **Pace Your Teaching**

The lessons in this course of study are designed for a study session of at least an hour in length. If it is the desire and intent of the class to complete an entire lesson each session, it will be necessary for you to summarize the content of certain answers or biblical references in order to preserve time. Asking various class members to look up different Bible passages and to read them aloud to the rest of the class will save time over having every class member look up each reference.

Also, you may not want to cover every question in each lesson. This may lead to undue haste and frustration. Be selective. Pace your teaching. Spend no more than 5–10 minutes opening the lesson. During the lesson, get the sweep of meaning. Occasionally stop to help the class gain understanding of a word or concept. Allow approximately 5 minutes for closing the lesson and announcements.

Should your group have more than a one-hour class period, you can take it more leisurely. But do not allow any lesson to drag and become tiresome. Keep it moving. Keep it alive. Keep it meaningful. Eliminate some questions and restrict yourself to those questions most meaningful to the members of the class. If most members study the text at home, they can report their findings, and the time gained can be applied to relating the lesson to life.

## **Good Preparation**

Good preparation by you, the leader, usually affects the pleasure and satisfaction the class will experience.

## **Suggestions to the Leader for Using the Study Guide**

### **I. The Lesson Pattern**

This set of lessons is designed to aid *Bible study*, that is, to aid a consideration of the written Word of God, with discussion and personal application growing out of the text at hand.

The typical lesson is divided into these sections:

1. Theme Verse
2. Objectives
3. Questions and Answers
4. Closing

The theme verse and objectives give you assistance in arousing the interest of the group in the concepts of the lesson. Here is where you stimulate the minds of the class members. Do not linger too long over the introductory remarks.

The questions and answers provide the real spadework necessary for Bible study. Here the class digs, uncovers, and discovers; it gets the facts and observes them. Your comments are needed only to the extent that they help the group understand the text. The questions in this guide, corresponding to sections within the text, are intended to help the participants discover the meaning of the text.

Having determined what the text says, the class is ready to apply the message. Having heard, read, marked, and learned the Word of God, proceed to digest it inwardly through discussion, evaluation, and application. This is done, as this guide suggests, by taking the truths found in Scripture and applying them to the world and Christianity in general and then to personal Christian life. Class time may not permit discussion of all questions and topics. In preparation, you may need to select one or two and focus on them. Close the session by reviewing one important truth from the lesson.

Remember, the Word of God is sacred, but this study guide is not. The notes in this section offer only guidelines and suggestions. Do not hesitate to alter the guidelines or substitute others to meet your needs and the needs of the participants. Adapt your teaching plan to your class and your class period. Good teaching directs the learner to discover for himself or herself. For you, the teacher, this means directing the learner, not giving the learner

answers. Choose the verses that should be looked up in Scripture. What discussion questions will you ask? At what points? Write them in the margin of your study guide. Involve class members, but give them clear directions. What practical actions might you propose for the week following the lesson? Which of the items do you consider most important for your class?

How will you best use your teaching period? Do you have 45 minutes? an hour? or an hour and a half? If time is short, what should you cut? Learn to become a wise steward of class time.

Be sure to take time to summarize the lesson, or have a class member do it. Plan a brief opening devotion, using members of the class. Remember to pray frequently for yourself and your class. May God the Holy Spirit bless your study and your leading of others into the comforting truths of God's Christ-centered Word.

# Lesson 1

## Prophecy, Promise, and Fulfillment

**Theme verse:** *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).*

Matthew 1:23

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- learn how Israel’s sin of idolatry led to her captivity;
- recognize that the Lord dwells with His people;
- rejoice that the Lord is building us into the temple of God.

### Historical Background

1. 2 Kings 21:1–16 outlines one of the many incidents of idolatry in Israel’s history. The people of Israel built altars at the high places and erected altars for Baal. Worship of Asherah was common among the people living in the land. The Lord forbade the people from worshiping Asherah (Deuteronomy 16:21). Asherah was a Canaanite goddess, the wife of El but the consort of Baal. Asherah and Baal were associated together and constituted a “divine couple.” It may be helpful to look up both Baal and Asherah in a Bible dictionary.

If the people of Israel kept the precepts of the Lord, they would remain in the land of promise. However, if the people followed after the way of Ahab by worshiping Baal and Asherah, they would enter into captivity. While captivity was a punishment for unfaithfulness, it also caused the Lord's faithful to repent and to call upon Him to remember His promises and be merciful. Nebuchadnezzar was the instrument the Lord used to bring about the people's repentance.

As the author to the Hebrews points out (12:7–11), the Lord's discipline is unpleasant. But God is neither capricious nor cruel; His discipline serves a purpose. God "disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness" (v. 10).

2. Answers will vary. Allow participants to answer on a voluntary basis. In our lives, the Lord uses external events to call us to repentance and to recognize that we need Him and His saving grace. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (v. 11).

### **The Role of the Temple**

3. The Lord fulfilled His promise to David to build His temple. The Lord promised to dwell among His people in the temple. Although God is present everywhere at all times, God was graciously present in the temple, hearing His people's prayers, receiving their worship, and forgiving their sins.
4. First, there is no other god besides the Lord God who created heaven and the earth. Second, even in the pagan mythologies, the gods were not like the Lord. The Lord is faithful to His promises. He makes a covenant with His people. The Lord is merciful and slow to anger; He forgives His people.
5. Solomon marvels that the Lord God, who fills the heaven and the earth, would deign to be located in a special way in the

temple (1 Kings 8:27–29). While this is a mystery, nothing is impossible for the Lord! Even though the heavens cannot contain Him, He can dwell in the temple. Solomon also notes that the temple is the place where the Lord would hear and forgive (v. 30).

6. To be cast out from the Lord’s gracious presence is to experience judgment. Usually, the Scriptures speak of the Lord’s presence as His favor, grace, and mercy. The Lord graciously dwells with His people; this is a blessing. However, to be removed from His gracious presence is to no longer experience the benefits of His favor; it is a curse.
7. On September 17, 592 BC (Ezekiel 8:1), the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the Lord’s glory departing the temple (Ezekiel 10). After being plundered, Jerusalem and the temple were burned by the Babylonians on August 28, 587 BC. Because of their unrepentant sin, the Lord removed His gracious presence from the temple. To be judged by the Lord is to be removed from His gracious presence and to experience His wrath, which in case of the Jews would include captivity.
8. Ultimately, to be cast from the Lord’s presence is to experience hell. In the parable of the wedding feast, the punishment of the unprepared wedding guest is described as being cast into “outer darkness,” that is, away from the gracious presence of the Lord (see Matthew 22:1–14). Hell is not the absence of the Lord’s presence. Rather, it is the absence of His *gracious* presence. Hell is the presence of the Lord’s wrath and judgment.

### **Jesus and His People as the Temple**

9. Isaiah prophesied that God would take on human flesh, being born of a virgin. The baby would be called *Immanuel*, meaning “God with us” (see Matthew 1:23). John wrote, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The

Greek word for “dwelt” literally means *tabernacled*, evoking God’s gracious presence in the Old Testament tabernacle and Jerusalem’s temple. Paul writes, “in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9–10), meaning that all of God fills Jesus; Jesus is God in human flesh. Thus, the Old Testament tabernacle and temple pointed forward to Jesus, who is their fulfillment. Jesus indicated as much in John 2:19–22 when He identified the true temple of God as His flesh.

10. Through His grace, which we receive through faith in Jesus Christ, God’s Spirit now dwells in all believers. Ephesians 2:19–22 notes that we are “members of the household of God” and that the Church is “a holy temple in the Lord.” Even as the Lord once dwelt in His temple in Jerusalem, now He permanently and fully dwells in Christ and in Christ’s Church, which is Christ’s Body (Ephesians 5:23).

### **God’s Word for Today**

11. Jesus never fails; He is always faithful to His promises. We can take comfort in that. He promises, “Behold, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus is with us always because He has put His name on us in Holy Baptism. Jesus will not forsake us. Our bodies are the temple of His Spirit, who dwells in us, whom we received from God (1 Corinthians 6:19).
12. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show us that the Lord remembers His promises and fulfills them. They record both the deeds of our gracious God and the deeds of His people. By God’s grace, they trusted in His mercy through the coming Messiah, Immanuel. As such, the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah are part of Jesus’ story; He Himself is a descendent of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel. Connected to Jesus through Baptism and faith, these stories are part of our own.

# Lesson 2

## Return from Exile

**Theme verse:** *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.*

Ezra 1:1

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- learn that the Lord uses rulers and secular powers for the benefit of His Church;
- see how the Lord stirs up His people by His Spirit;
- rejoice that the Lord does not forget His promises.

13. Cyrus is called a “shepherd,” “anointed,” and chosen by the Lord for this task. Some see Cyrus as a type of messiah or deliverer of God's people, pointing ahead to the full deliverance of the Lord's people by Jesus Christ. Cyrus created the largest empire the world had seen at that time. His reign is considered a great turning point in the history of the ancient world.
14. The Old Testament kings of Israel, of which David was king par excellence, were anointed with oil. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit for His ministry (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 3:21–22; 4:17–19). Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11–18).

15. Israel was held captive by Babylon. Jeremiah prophesied Israel's deliverance from their enemy. Thus, the destruction of Babylon was good news for the people of Israel.
16. Christians should not seek retaliation (Matthew 5:38–42), but should love their enemies and bless those who curse them (vv. 43–48). However, Jesus' command does not imply that seeking justice or using God-given means for achieving peace, justice, and protection are wrong. Read Romans 13:1–7. God instituted government specifically to punish evil. When the government, the police, or the courts fail to do their duty, the Christian should pray to the Lord for justice. How, when, and in what manner justice is delivered is in the Lord's hands. Christians have no right to seek retribution on their own or to engage in vigilante justice. Like Israel, we are to trust the Lord to deliver justice.
17. The Lord destroyed the Egyptians who held the people of Israel in captivity. He drove out the peoples inhabiting the land of promise. David defeated the Philistines. Saul, the enemy of David, was defeated. The Assyrians and Babylonians were destroyed. Essentially, Israel's enemies were destroyed when Israel was faithful; Israel's enemies were victorious when Israel broke faith with God. Ultimately, God used the Romans to destroy biblical Israel for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. The modern nation of Israel is not biblical Israel; the true Israel is now the Church (Romans 11).
18. In the modern era, people eagerly point out the Church's failings and see its demands and precepts as oppressive. Yet the Church has curbed much evil in the world. Slavery was diminished greatly and eventually overturned in most parts of the world because of the Church. Human sacrifice was largely eliminated because of the Church. The Church has always been concerned with the poor, the orphan, and the widow. The Church has sought to help those in need and the suffering be-

cause of the love of Christ. Although the primary purpose of the Church is to proclaim salvation in Christ and the forgiveness of sins through faith in His name, faith cannot help but be active in love toward the neighbor in need.

### **“Stirred by the Spirit”**

19. The Lord raised up Cyrus to fulfill what He had prophesied through Isaiah and Jeremiah. Cyrus’s success as a military commander and as a ruler is attributable to the Lord for the sake of His Church. Ultimately, all of history serves the Lord’s purposes. While today we may speculate how the Lord uses history, our perspective is veiled. We cannot be certain why He raises up a certain world leader or allows some disaster to happen. Yet we can be certain that He works all things for our good (Romans 8:28). On one level, the Lord raised up Cyrus to return the people of Israel to Jerusalem so Christ could be born in Bethlehem. The right time (Romans 5:6) occurred during the Roman Empire with its laws, roads, and general peace, which assisted in the proclamation of the Christian message. This also means that now is the right time for the tasks that face the Church today. The Lord is the Lord of all history, who works all things for His purpose.
20. The Lord promised His people that Israel was their home, and that He would dwell among them in the Jerusalem temple. The majority of the people in captivity became comfortable with their surroundings and saw no reason to leave. Not every eligible Israelite who could return to Jerusalem did in fact return. Some Israelites probably forgot what the Lord had promised altogether. Others figured they had a good life and had made Babylon their home. They saw no reason to return, nor did they have a desire. A remnant, or minority, longed for their homeland because the Lord promised it to them. The Israelites who returned to Jerusalem did so because the Lord stirred them up by God’s Spirit through His Word of promise.

In a similar way, many people today are comfortable with the world and do not long for what the Lord has promised us. Nevertheless, God’s children live here as strangers longing for their heavenly home. If time permits, review “I’m But a Stranger Here” (*LSB* 748).

### **Temple Items and People Return**

21. In general, Cyrus adopted a position of tolerance toward the people he conquered as well as leniency toward their respective religions. Nevertheless, neither his disposition nor his governmental policies fully explain why he went beyond financial support for the reconstruction of the city and temple to include even the release of the temple vessels. The items that had been profaned were reconsecrated and put back into the Lord’s service. While he may not have had personal faith, Cyrus nevertheless recognized “the LORD, the God of heaven” (Ezra 1:2), and it was this God, the one and only true God, who moved Cyrus by His Spirit (v. 1).
22. By mentioning their names, the lists show in a concrete way that the Lord was fulfilling His promises to real people.

### **God’s Word for Today**

23. Answers will vary; allow participants to contribute on a voluntary basis. The Lord promises that the hardships, trials, and sufferings that we face in this life are unable to separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35). Suffering is not a sign that the Lord has abandoned us. In fact, the Lord promises to be with us when we are suffering.
24. The quotation from the Formula of Concord concerns predestination. It confesses that the sufferings and trials we face in this life were ordained before the foundation of the world. At first, this does not seem to be very comforting. However, the Lord predetermined our sufferings so that we

would face nothing in this life that would take us away from Him. In this way, our Lord protects us. Another theme used to speak of suffering is the theology of the cross. In summary, trials, hardships, and suffering are crosses that we bear in this life for the sake of Christ. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh cause us to doubt the Lord's promises. The Bible teaches us that we Christians can expect to suffer just as our Lord suffered. This passage from the Formula of Concord affirms that God's purpose, even in suffering, is to conform us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

# Lesson 3

## Rebuilding the Temple

**Theme verse:** *And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*

Ezra 3:11b

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- recognize the Lord's faithfulness in the rebuilding of the altar and the reestablishment of the Old Testament sacrificial system;
- learn that Satan wants nothing more than to oppose the Lord's gracious coming to His people;
- confess that the Lord Himself accomplishes His purposes.

### Rebuilding the Altar

25. God commanded His people to bring their worship—tithes, offerings, and sacrifices—to the temple in Jerusalem and to no other place.
26. In the Old Testament, the Lord provided very specific instructions regarding how and where He was to be worshiped. In particular, instructions for temple sacrifices provided certainty that the Lord would be present in a gracious way for His people, the sacrifices as He instructed would be acceptable to

Him, and their sins would be forgiven. In the same way, although God has not prescribed certain ceremonies or rituals for New Testament worship, we can be certain of the Lord's gracious and forgiving presence among us when we gather in Christ's name and receive His Word and Sacraments.

## **Rebuilding the Temple**

27. Haggai 2:7 and Malachi 3:1 have traditionally been interpreted as referring to the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Haggai's prophecy of the "desire of all nations" (KJV) coming to the temple (actually, Herod's temple) would have inspired the people in spite of the rebuilt temple's lack of splendor.

## **Opposition to the Rebuilding**

28. The people who opposed the rebuilding were the Samaritans. The term "Samaritan" only occurs once in the Old Testament (2 Kings 17:29). The Samaritans claimed Jacob as their father, thus having a common heritage with the Jews. The Samaritans did not think it essential to worship in Jerusalem. This might explain some of their opposition to the rebuilding of the temple. Since the Samaritans were of mixed heritage, the Jews tended to associate them with Gentiles.
29. The letter to King Artaxerxes describes the building of the wall around Jerusalem, not the rebuilding of the altar or of the temple.
30. Ezra wanted to show the people that their ancestors faced problems similar to what they were experiencing.
31. Jerusalem was called a rebellious and wicked city. The Israelites were accused of rebelling against the king and for refusing to pay taxes.
32. The king decreed that the record showed Jerusalem was a wicked and rebellious city.

33. Ezra 4:23 describes the stoppage of work on the city of Jerusalem.
34. The end of verse 24 describes the stoppage of work on the temple.

### **God's Word for Today**

35. As soon as Jesus had been born, King Herod tried to destroy Him. Herod did not want to lose power. For their part, the Romans were not interested in a power struggle or in a Jewish civil war over who was the leader of the Jews. However, the appearance of a rival king could cause political instability. As soon as the Lord's work became manifest, Satan and the Lord's other enemies set out to hinder and to stop Him—even if it meant His life. Allow participants to provide other examples from Scripture.
36. Answers will vary. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh do not want the Lord to save us and to dwell with us forever. The success of Jesus is the defeat of Satan. Since the devil hates all of God's creation and all that is good, he wants to prevent Jesus from saving His people. Participants may mention governments that prohibit the distribution of Bibles or religious tracts, laws that encourage or support immorality (hindering or preventing Law and Gospel preaching), and so on.

# Lesson 4

## Completion of the Temple

**Theme verse:** *On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover.*

Ezra 6:19

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- see that through preaching, reading, and meditating on His Word, God encourages His people;
- take to heart that the Lord strengthens our faith in His promises through Word and Sacrament;
- give thanks that Christ gives us joy in our lives.

### Prophecy and Promise

37. God's promise of His gracious presence encouraged His people because they knew that He would bless their work. They had the Lord's favor and He would grant them success. In his commentary on Haggai, Luther writes, Here the unspeakable mercy of God is promised in words that appear to be sparse and brief. If God, then, is for us, who can be against us? Much less will an enemy be able to harm us, for he cannot harm God. Here all creatures must yield. If we have God as our Protector (for this is what he calls God being with us), no evil, no pestilence, no persecution, no temptation either physical

or spiritual can be so great as to cause us to fall. How could creatures overcome their Creator? See Romans 8:38f. (AE 18:377–378)

38. In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus promises that He is with His people even until the end of time—and forever. Jesus never fails, and He will never abandon us. This gives us great comfort.

## The Letters

39. Tattenai asked Darius to search the royal archives in Babylon to see if Cyrus in fact issued a decree setting the Israelites free and authorizing them to rebuild the city.
40. Darius told Tattenai to stay away from the Jews and to allow the work to proceed. The house of God was to be rebuilt. The royal revenue would cover the costs. Whatever was needed would be given. Darius threatened to impale anyone who interfered with his decree.
41. In Romans 13, Paul writes that we are to be subject to the governing authorities. Commenting on verse 4, Luther writes, “*For he is God’s servant*, even though he himself who holds the power may be ignorant of the fact . . . in order that he may remove you from evil” (AE 25:110). For even if evil men do not serve Him, God yet causes it to happen that the good which they have and which they misuse serves Him. Hence the king of Babylon, a godless idolater, is called a “servant” by God in the writings of the prophets. King Darius fulfilled his duty by protecting the people of Israel from those who wished them harm. Ezra presented the completion of the temple as the will of kings Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Anyone who opposed the rebuilding of the temple opposed these kings. Since the Lord God stirred His Spirit within these kings to make them favorable to the rebuilding, anyone who opposed the kings’ will also opposed God’s will.

## **The Completion of the Temple**

42. In Ezekiel 37, the Lord promised to gather His scattered people and to set His sanctuary in their midst. He also promised to dwell with them. He would be their God and they would be His people. The Lord made the rebuilt temple His sanctuary. The nations recognized that the Lord set apart (sanctified) His people—evidenced by the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. God also promised to save His people from idols and from backsliding. After the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites seemed “cured” of gross idolatry, that is, the worship of Baal and Asherah. God promised to cleanse His people and to forgive them their sin. The temple foreshadowed the coming of Christ.
43. In verse 24, the Lord says that David will rule over them and that they will have one shepherd. Jesus is of the house of David and He is the one Shepherd of His people. Jesus is prince over His people forever, as Ezekiel said. The temple only lasted for a time. When Christ came, the time of the temple of stone was over. Jesus is the temple of flesh that remains with His people forever.

## **The Celebration of Passover**

44. The Passover was the feast the Lord instituted when the people of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt. The people were to sacrifice a lamb and eat unleavened bread with bitter herbs. This was the chief and greatest feast celebrated by the Israelites.
45. No temple meant no Passover feast. Luther writes, “That is what this means, that men should offer up the Passover, ‘not in any place’ (as Moses impresses here again) but where God has chosen” (AE 9:157). The resumption of the Passover in Ezra’s time shows that the Lord had remembered His children and that His favor was upon them. Since the destruction of

the temple in AD 70, the Jewish people have not celebrated a proper Passover, which requires that a sacrificed lamb be eaten along with bitter herbs and matzo. The contemporary Jewish Seder is a substitution for the Passover.

46. The Lord's Supper was instituted when Jesus and the disciples were celebrating the Passover. The Lord's Supper fulfills and supersedes the Passover. There is no longer any need for this Old Testament feast. Jesus is the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). His sacrifice on the cross has fulfilled and completed all sacrifices (Hebrews 10). We eat our Passover Lamb and drink His blood in His Holy Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

### **God's Word for Today**

47. Answers will vary. It is ironic that the captivity of the people of Israel lasted seventy years and that the communist rule lasted seventy years. Not too much can be made of this, but the irony remains. Both the people of Israel and this Russian woman experienced great joy after receiving a sacramental gift from the Lord after so long doing without. Why didn't the woman commune during the communist rule? She did not commune because there were no Lutheran pastors to administer Communion to her. There is a parallel to the situation described in Ezra. Imagine the joy of this Russian believer when she finally received the Lord's body and blood after so many years of waiting.
48. Answers will vary. The people rejoiced when they saw the temple completed. Encourage participants to list the specific ways the Lord has given them joy.

# Lesson 5

## Return of Ezra

**Theme verse:** *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

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- see that the Lord sends His servants to care for the Church;
- learn that the Law (or Torah) also includes the entire teaching of God;
- affirm that through Ezra, Paul, and our pastors, God serves His people.

### Overview

49. Ezra presented His credentials to prove that he was a priest and scribe called by the Lord. Today, we can be certain we are hearing and are being taught God's Word by comparing what we hear and read to the Bible.
50. Ezra listed his credentials to show that he came from the proper family and that he had the proper training for his position. God called Ezra through the means God had established. In Galatians 2:11–17, Paul provided similar credentials similar to Ezra: he was raised in Judaism and was taught in the tradition

of the fathers. Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, having been fully trained in the Law. Even more importantly, however, Paul was called not through the mediation of men, but immediately by Jesus Christ (Acts 22).

51. In Jesus' day, the scribes and the Pharisees did not practice what they preached. Nor did they properly divide Law and Gospel. When a person's conscience was burdened with guilt, the scribes and Pharisees prescribed more rules and regulations. Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. Pastors, teachers, and other church workers should live lives in concert with the faith they profess, as should all Christians.
52. Ezra's credentials can be summarized as: study, do, and teach the Law of God. Although 1 Timothy 3:1–13 gives some specific things the pastor should or should not do, Paul's list is essentially the same as Ezra's.

### **Authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah**

53. The Scriptures do not state who the author(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah were. Some suggest that the person who wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles also wrote Ezra and Nehemiah. The very end of 2 Chronicles is very similar to the beginning of Ezra. According to Jewish tradition, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah originally comprised one book, not two as we have today. Some argue that Ezra and Nehemiah were composed by an unknown author. However, there is no compelling reason to think that Ezra did not compose the book named after him or that Nehemiah did not write his book. Regardless of authorship, both books are God's inspired and infallible Word.

### **Ezra's Sending**

54. Ezra was a priest, a scribe, and a learned man knowing God's commandments and statutes.

55. Artaxerxes sent Ezra and other priests or Levites and people of Israel who willingly wanted to go to Jerusalem. He provided gold, silver, and vessels for the temple. He also gave Ezra access to the treasury near Jerusalem.
56. Ezra attributed his success to the Lord, who put generous thoughts into the king's heart.

### **The Return**

57. The names recorded are those who believed God's promises, including the sending of the Messiah, and thus had eternal life. In a sense, it could be said that those names recorded in Ezra were written in the Book of Life (see Philippians 4:2–3; Revelation 3:5). Ezra discovered that there were no Levites among those returning. He needed Levites for the temple.
58. While prayer is not a Means of Grace, prayer is an exercise of faith. Ezra and others prayed because they trusted in God's mercy and provision.

### **God's Word for Today**

59. Every good shepherd cares for the sheep. The Old Testament prophets cared for God's flock by pointing them to Jesus. New Testament apostles and our pastors today are good shepherds because they care for us by pointing us to Jesus.
60. Our pastors and teachers today build us up through properly applying Law and Gospel to our lives, just as Ezra did to the saints under his care.

# Lesson 6

## Ezra's Reforms

**Theme verse:** *Behold, we are before You in our guilt, for none can stand before You because of this.*

Ezra 9:15b

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- see how idolatry led to the captivity;
  - learn how to pray from the Scriptures;
  - see the role of Confession and Absolution in the life of the Church.
61. Ezra's approach was very pastoral. First, Ezra did not realize that the Levites had married foreign women. (Sometimes, the pastor is the last person to know what is going on in a congregation.) When Ezra realized this, he immediately tore his robes as a sign of repentance (Ezra 9:3). Ezra feared that this disregard for the Lord's Law could result in punishment. Those of the congregation who understood the problem and grieved over the sin of the people gathered around Ezra to support him (10:1). Ezra repented and prayed for the Lord's mercy and guidance. He preached to the people, forgave their sin, and instituted reform (vv. 2–5, 10–12, 16–17).

## Ezra's Grief Over Sin

62. The Lord is a jealous God, desiring that He alone be worshiped. He knew how His people would be tempted and how they would fall into sin. He commanded them to not enter into a covenant with the people of the land and to not marry their daughters. The Law functioned to protect the people. In the case of the people of Israel and in the context of this passage, the threat of exile and punishment was a *deterrent* (first use of the Law) for the people so that they would not marry foreign women. It also worked to *instruct* (third use) the people so that they knew that they should not marry the women of the land. When they violated the Law, the people were *convicted* by it (second use).
63. Shortly after he built the temple to the Lord, Solomon built places of worship, temples, devoted to false gods for his many wives. When he could have been a faithful spiritual leader in his home, Solomon chose rather to placate his household.
64. The Lord threatened to remove His people from the land. Because of Solomon's sin, the children of Israel persisted in idolatry and were ultimately led into captivity.
65. The tearing of one's robes or cloak was a sign of repentance. Ezra thereby indicated his grief and repentance over their sin. Moses and other prophets tore their garments as a sign of grief over sin. Ezra also prayed for the people.

## Ezra's Prayer

66. Ezra prayed the Scriptures. He wove passages from the Book of Moses (the Torah), the Psalms, and Isaiah into his prayers.
67. Abraham, Moses, Ezra, and our Lord Jesus all prayed and interceded for other people. In particular, they prayed for the children of God. Jesus still intercedes for us before the throne of our heavenly Father.

68. It is a truly amazing thought that Jesus prays for us. No one knows better what we need than Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was tempted in every way, as we are, but remained without sin. As fully God and fully Man, Jesus knows how to pray and intercede on behalf of His people.

### **The People Confess Their Sin**

69. A large number of Israelites—men, women, and children—joined in weeping with Ezra (Ezra 10:1). Based on the recommendation of Shecaniah, they made an oath to put away their foreign wives and children (vv. 2–5). On pain of excommunication and losing all property, they ordered all exiles to return to Jerusalem within three days (vv. 7–8). They confessed their sins and agreed before God to put away their foreign wives and children. However, due to the heavy rains and the need for sufficient time, they requested more time to proceed in an orderly fashion (vv. 9–15).
70. The complete assembly met on the twentieth day of the ninth month (v. 9). Family heads began meeting about ten days later, on the first day of the tenth month (v. 16). Determination of exiles who had married foreign wives concluded three months after that, on the first day of the first month (v. 17).
71. Those who had married foreign wives vowed to put them away and offered sacrifices for their disobedience (see Deuteronomy 7:3). Malachi 2 (see especially v. 14) suggests that these men had divorced their Israelite wives in order to marry foreign women. In such a case, the men were commanded to give up an adulterous relationship rather than divorce a legal spouse. Nevertheless, the pain for the women involved in and children borne of such illicit unions must have been very great once these were dissolved.

## God's Word for Today

72. Answers will vary. These questions provide an opportunity for participants to address contemporary issues regarding marriage and their feelings about them. Seek to guide participants into a discussion of God's purpose and plan for marriage and its attendant blessings (see Genesis 1:26–28; 2:18–25; Matthew 19:3–9; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3).
73. This is an opportunity to discuss how Confession and Absolution frees the Christian from the guilt of sin. Perhaps the section on Confession and Absolution from the Small Catechism (found both in *Lutheran Worship* and the *Lutheran Service Book*) can be used as a basis for instruction and discussion. Martin Luther considered Confession and Absolution one of the greatest gifts the Lord has given to His people. Absolution puts to death the sinful nature. The comforting words of Absolution, “Your sins are forgiven,” are the sweetest words a sinner can hear.

# Lesson 7

## Return of Nehemiah

**Theme verse:** *The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we His servants will arise and build.*

Nehemiah 2:20

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- see how the Lord uses Christians where He has put them for the good of their neighbor and to His glory;
  - rejoice that God gives us good things even in the midst of disaster, suffering, or hardship.
74. Both Nehemiah and Ezra were Israelites. Both their families were likely well-to-do (at least Nehemiah seems to have been later in his life). Ezra was a Levite and traced his family lineage back to Aaron. Not much is known about Nehemiah's family. However, we do know the name of his father and that he had a brother. Scripture does not record any other family details.
75. Both Nehemiah and Ezra were well educated. Nehemiah's background was probably similar to that of Daniel, as both served in the king's royal court. As we saw earlier, Ezra's educational emphasis was Hebraic. He came from a priestly family and learned how to be a priest. He also had training as a scribe. Possibly, he served as a scribe for the Persians,

which, if true, could explain why the king of Persia held Ezra in such high regard. While Ezra's family was likely well-to-do, Nehemiah's family was very wealthy. Nehemiah supported a household of over a hundred individuals, including family, servants, and guests. He even assisted in the financing of some of the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Although from a good Israelite family and knowing the Law of Moses, he was trained to serve in the royal court, to be an administrator or businessman, and likely was politically savvy.

### **Nehemiah's Awakening**

76. Like Ezra, Nehemiah prayed using the Scriptures and liturgy of the service. He focused on repentance because so much of Israel's hardship had been caused by their sin. Nehemiah recognized that he was a poor sinner as well and that his family contributed to the guilt of Israel. Why do Christians pray after something bad has happened? Because the Lord has commanded and invited us to pray to Him in all circumstances. When something bad happens in the life of the Christian, he or she prays, *Kyrie, eleison*, "Lord, have mercy."
77. Nehemiah reminded the Lord of His promise to gather His people, to dwell among them, and that He had redeemed His people with a strong arm and had promised to show them mercy. Nehemiah's prayer was a plea for forgiveness and the Lord's favor. The Lord loves to be reminded of His promises. Nehemiah prayed, trusting in the Lord's promises.

### **Nehemiah Goes to Jerusalem**

78. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. If you recall from the Book of Esther (4:16), it was illegal to approach the king uninvited. Esther risked her life to approach the king and make a request. It was no different for Nehemiah. The king, in general, was not concerned with the personal problems of his ser-

vants. The fact that Nehemiah was sad and that he let the king see that he was sad put his life in danger. Yet the Lord's favor was upon Nehemiah and the king wanted to help him. Nehemiah asked the king for three things: (1) to send him to Judah, (2) to allow him to rebuild the city walls, and (3) to provide supplies and materials to rebuild the city.

79. Both Ezra and Nehemiah had the ear and the favor of the king. The king granted their requests. Both men were leaders. Ezra led the Church while Nehemiah made use of his position in the government to support the Church and her mission.

### **Nehemiah Inspects the Walls**

80. Nehemiah rested for three days, just as Ezra did. While three days might well have been a good number of days for rest, Jonah rested for three days in the belly of a fish. Jesus rested for three days in the tomb.
81. It was safer for Nehemiah to inspect the city at night than during the day. He also did not want to create unnecessary opposition.
82. The officials were faithless (Ezra 9:2). The officials would no doubt have tried to discourage Nehemiah from inspecting these gates or would have shown him parts of the wall in better repair so he could not fully assess the situation.
83. Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the walls so that the people of Jerusalem would no longer suffer scorn and derision. The officials disloyal to the king accused Nehemiah, essentially calling him a traitor. Nehemiah was not only loyal to his earthly king, but he was also loyal to His heavenly King, God, and to His people and His city.

## God's Word for Today

84. Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee, and a Roman citizen by birth. His citizenship allowed him easier travel through the empire for the sake of the Gospel. When the Jews would attempt to silence him, imprison him, or even kill him, Paul's Roman citizenship allowed him to appeal even to Caesar himself. Also, Paul had learned the trade of a tentmaker. This allowed him to support himself on missionary journeys so that he would not burden fledgling churches.
85. The Lord makes use of the places in which He has put us. The Church has always relied on people to make use of what the Lord has given them in this world to benefit the Church. In New Testament times, congregations met in the homes of wealthy individuals because it was illegal for them to purchase property and have buildings of their own. There are too many examples to list. Encourage participants to list the ways God uses their skills, talents, vocations, and wealth to further the Gospel.

# Lesson 8

## Rebuilding the Wall

**Theme verse:** *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

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- see that the ways of the Lord often appear foolish to the world;
- recognize that the Lord works through weakness, often choosing the weak so that His power is made manifest;
- see how the Lord protects us from evil.

### Overview of the Rebuilding

86. Answers will vary. A number of books and articles note Nehemiah's leadership ability and his role as a community developer. No doubt Nehemiah possessed good leadership skills, some of which were God given and others that were learned through education and experience. Some of his administrative ability came from the training he had as a cupbearer in the Persian king's court. Once in Jerusalem, he was able to quickly assess the damage to the walls and formulate a plan to repair them. He also succeeded in uniting the community.

87. The rebuilding of the community was more than a political or sociological event; it was a spiritual event fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy (see Ezra 1:1). Through the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Lord was gathering His people around His Word and promises to restore Jerusalem's walls and her temple.

## **Rebuilding Begins**

88. From a practical and military perspective, the gates were needed to protect Jerusalem from her enemies. Jeremiah prophesied that the gates would be rebuilt. On one level, the Lord promised to restore Jerusalem, which is why the priests consecrated the restored gates. However, the gates also represented a separation of the Lord's people from the idolaters who surrounded them. The Book of Revelation speaks of new Jerusalem's twelve gates, each made of a single pearl (Revelation 21:9–14, 21, 25). This is what the books of Ezra and Nehemiah foreshadow. The rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and gates has an eschatological flavor, a foreshadowing of what is to come when Christ our Lord returns.
89. A map of Jerusalem during Bible times might help participants understand how the city was laid out. The gates receive attention because once they were rebuilt with doors, they could keep enemies out of the city. To consecrate city gates in his day, Solomon sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. There were so many sacrifices that they did not fit on the bronze altar.
90. By speaking His Word, Jesus healed an invalid at the pool of Bethesda, located near the Sheep Gate. At that time, it was commonly believed that the first person to enter the pool when it was agitated would be healed.
91. Jeremiah prophesied that the city would be rebuilt, even describing the reconstruction process, going from gate to gate. Zechariah spoke of the gates being restored. He concludes,

“Jerusalem shall dwell in security” (Zechariah 14:11). The rebuilding of the gates by Nehemiah was a fulfillment of the Lord’s promise uttered by His prophets.

## **Opposition to Work**

92. Since the builders were doing what God had commanded, insulting the builders was the same as insulting God. Since God made man, cursing him is the same as cursing God: “With [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). Nehemiah asked the Lord to listen to the taunting and not hide their guilt because these men had insulted Him in the presence of the builders.
93. Nehemiah called for the people to “Remember the Lord” (Nehemiah 4:14). This means to remember all His good deeds and His mighty acts. In this case, it meant the fulfillment of God’s prophecy of the rebuilding of the city. And it includes the other events whereby God rescued His people. Recall how the Lord delivered Noah and his family from the flood, how He called Abraham, how He delivered His people out of Egypt, and so on. The people were experiencing God’s deliverance just as their fathers and mothers in faith had experienced it!

## **Work Resumes**

94. The Lord frustrates the plans of the wicked. Nehemiah neither credited himself for the rebuilding of the walls, nor did he trust in his skill or leadership abilities. Instead, he recognized that the Lord brought about this accomplishment. God used Nehemiah, the high priest, the priests, and all the workers to rebuild the wall. God did not allow Israel’s enemies to succeed. So, while Nehemiah and others played a role, the Lord received all the credit for rebuilding His city.

95. The people were comforted at hearing the Lord's Word that He fights for them. "Our God will fight for us" comes directly from the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Joshua 23:10). From the context, it seems that the people sang this phrase as a liturgical hymn or spiritual song (see Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). Hearing God's Word and promises encouraged the people to finish the walls.

### God's Word for Today

96. The Lord continually frustrates the plans of the wicked. People often ask, "Why is there *so much* evil in the world?" We might ask instead, "Why isn't there *more* evil in the world?" Until the Lord returns, we will never know how many tragedies, wars, illnesses, and such have been prevented or reduced in severity due to God's gracious and affirmative answer to His Church's prayers. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to deliver us from evil; ultimately, this is a prayer that we may die in the faith should the Lord tarry. The Church's continued existence proves that the Lord is frustrating the plans of the wicked. Through the moral and just laws of governments and the charitable work of His people, the Lord is curbing and limiting evil still today.
97. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls probably looked foolish to Israel's enemies. To the Jews who remained, it probably seemed foolish to leave a comfortable life in Babylon to return to a city that had been destroyed. Likewise, the suffering of Christ on the cross is foolishness to the world—even today. Missionaries sometimes hear, "What good is a God who died?" The death and resurrection of Jesus for the full forgiveness of our sins makes no sense to the world. It only makes sense when received by faith. Having been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we join with Paul in clinging to the foolishness of Christ's cross, which displays God's power and wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24).

# Lesson 9

## Internal and External Problems

**Theme verse:** *And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

Nehemiah 5:13

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- learn about the Church’s responsibility to show mercy to her neighbors and to her community.

### Nehemiah Stops Oppression

98. The people were hungry and needed grain. Some of the Jews had food while others did not. Those who did not complained because food was not being shared. Because the Israelites were accused of being rebels and troublemakers, they paid taxes to the king faithfully. In order to pay the taxes, some were mortgaging their fields.

Despite these problems, the people of Israel were increasing in number and had many children. This was certainly a gift from the Lord and a fulfillment of His promise that they would possess the land.

There was also a spiritual component to the lack of food. The Lord promised to give them this land; if the people did not have enough food, thus becoming weak or perhaps starving, He

might appear unfaithful to His promise. The Law prohibited the mortgaging of property with interest and the selling of children into slavery. The children of Israel were disregarding the Lord's command, which also shows a spiritual issue was involved.

99. There are some similarities with the outcry mentioned in Acts 6:1–7. Believers complained to the apostles about inequity in daily food distribution: the Greek widows did not receive as much as the Jewish widows. The apostles had to take steps to show there is no partiality in Christ Jesus.
100. “If you lend money to any of My people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him” (Exodus 22:25). Note that this command does not seem to prohibit the lending of money in general, but usuriously to the poor. Historically, the poor have been victims of usurious rates of interest. Short-term loans allowed the Israelites to eat, but in the long term they severely damaged the Israelites' ability to earn a living wage. These desperate people who had many sons and daughters would also sell their children into slavery. As despicable as it may seem to us to sell one's own children, in some cases it was the only way to keep the children alive. At least as a slave the child could eat and live. There were of course less honorable reasons for selling one's children too. In any case, the Lord forbade the selling of the Jewish people in slavery to one another. In Nehemiah's time, this was also taking place.
101. Nehemiah was an incredible individual and a good leader. Ultimately, he solved the problem by addressing the underlying spiritual issues. The people began to follow the Law.
102. Nehemiah was angry with the people who charged such interest and who put their Jewish brothers into slavery. Nehemiah told them to return their money, their fields, and their vineyards, and to release their brothers from slavery. He also

made them swear before the priests and called a curse upon them if they backed out of their promise to the Lord. Nehemiah 5:13 says, “And the people did as they had promised.” What had been viewed as a private matter became a public matter before the Lord. He would judge the people for breaking their promise.

103. The people agreed with Nehemiah’s actions and decisions. Most importantly, they agreed with God that these practices were wrong and would deserve the Lord’s curse should they fail to obey. “Amen” means truly, truly, or as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “Yes, yes, it shall be so.” In contemporary Evangelical parlance, the phrase “And the people said, ‘Amen’” is typically used to indicate that the congregation agrees something is good, or that they agree on how the congregation praised the Lord. This contemporary usage is not the same as is found in Nehemiah.
104. Nehemiah practiced what he preached. Ezra obeyed the statutes that he preached. Both men lived in the way of the Lord. Nehemiah was generous. Paul followed this pattern of generosity. He put the needs of the Church ahead of his own.
105. At first, Nehemiah’s enemies tried to use violence to get rid of him. This time, his enemies attacked his reputation by inciting rumors that Jerusalem planned to rebel under Nehemiah’s leadership. An application that can be drawn from this section is the Eighth Commandment. In the explanation in the Small Catechism, Luther says that we should speak well of our neighbor, protect his reputation and defend him, and “explain everything in the kindest way.”
106. The completion of the wall demoralized the enemies of Jerusalem and made them fearful. They could see that the Lord was on the side of the Israelites.
107. Review “The Lists in Ezra and Nehemiah” in the introductory material. They show that the Lord is dwelling among His people, building them into His temple.

## God's Word for Today

108. As God's New Testament people, we are not relieved of caring for our neighbor. Taking advantage of the poor is wrong; it is an act motivated by unbelief. Rather, Christians love their neighbor in word and deed; they help to alleviate their neighbor's suffering. Christians may not agree on the best way how to help the poor, the widows, and the suffering, yet they should agree to help them. Nehemiah provides us a case study for trying to address social problems.
109. "We love because He [God, in Christ] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Christians show love to one another by helping those in the congregation who have needs: widows, orphans, the sick, and so on. In the Early Church, pagans saw these deeds and marveled at the Christians. Even today, the showing of love to our neighbor can be a powerful witness of God's love for us in Christ. Such acts of mercy might even provoke the question, "What motivates you to do this?" What an open door to share the Gospel of Jesus!

# Lesson 10

## Restoration of the Divine Service

**Theme verse:** *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

Nehemiah 8:8

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- learn that the highest worship is receiving the forgiveness of sins;
- understand that worship consists of repeating back to the Lord what He has first said to us;
- recognize that a regular pattern to worship goes back to the Old Testament.

110. In the context of Nehemiah, the Lord's Word literally liberated His people from captivity. Israel was punished for her idolatry. The Lord's Word of promise set them free. This section of Nehemiah is the fulfillment of that promise. The Lord's Word of promise—the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ—sets us free from the captivity of sin and death.

111. The Word of God unified the people as “one man” (Nehemiah 8:1). The vision that united them was not the product of

Ezra or Nehemiah. Rather, it was the fulfillment of the Lord's promises among them.

## **Ezra Reads the Law**

112. The Scriptures are sufficiently clear in themselves. Aided by the Holy Spirit, the believer can ascertain not only the meaning of the words and letters on the page (which can be accomplished by an unbeliever), but also their true, spiritual sense. As did Jews of that day, the Gentile Ethiopian may have trusted in God's promises concerning the Messiah proclaimed in this passage of Isaiah. However, until Philip preached to him, the Ethiopian eunuch had not heard how Jesus had fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. Hearing Philip's preaching, the eunuch further expressed his God-given faith (given through Scripture and the preaching of God's Word) by requesting to be baptized. Undoubtedly, as we frequently witness in the Book of Acts, Philip proclaimed the saving benefits of Baptism as part of his evangelical message.
113. Answers will vary. Following rabbinic tradition, some argue that Ezra and the priests translated the Scripture from Hebrew to Aramaic when they read, and this is why the people could now understand the Scriptures. This may be the case. Yet they could have simply read the text and expounded upon it, such as what occurs in a traditional Bible study class. Apparently, the people had not had a lot of teaching, as our study of the Feast of Booths will show below.

## **A Holy Day and the Feast of Booths**

114. The people wept when they heard the Word of the Lord read. Apparently this Book of the Law had been lost. These people had never heard it before. Some may have wept for joy, but the context seems to indicate that it was mournful. The people may have been convicted of their sin and wept in repentance. It also

seems that they wept because they did not understand. Notice that the people stopped weeping once they understood.

115. The seasons of the Church Year allow us to focus on a theme. The “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) is to be declared to the Lord’s people. The Church Year makes it possible to distribute the whole counsel of God in manageable sections. The seasons of the Church Year also reflect our human emotions; some parts of the year are joyous while others are subdued. Few people are “high” or “low” all of the time. Emotions ebb and flow with life events. The Church Year takes some of this into account.
116. A Bible dictionary may help here. The Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) is one of three major feasts in Judaism, the others being the Passover and the Festival of Weeks. The feast usually occurs in late September or early October. It is a joyous and thankful harvest festival. It also commemorates how the Lord protected His people. The people had not heard about this feast, which shows the lack of teaching during the years of captivity. The people had a deficiency in their knowledge of God’s Word.

### **The People of Israel Confess Their Sins**

117. The Israelites expressed repentance publicly by putting on ashes and sackcloth. They also expressed it by fasting and prayer. Scripture mentions shaving the head or giving alms as a sign of repentance. Participants may mention the public Confession and Absolution that begins many of our worship services today or the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, which many congregations do. Helpful is to keep in mind the Lord’s injunction in Matthew 6:1–18, which indicates that true repentance does not consist simply in outward actions (although Jesus approves giving alms, prayer, and fasting), but also in the interior attitude of the heart.

118. Repetition is the key to learning. By repeating God's Words—His gracious promises and deeds—in a variety of ways, including in hymnody and song, the Word of Christ dwells in us richly (Colossians 3:16). Through that Word of Christ—the Gospel—God gives us eternal life (John 5:39).

### **The Sealing of the Covenant**

119. The core of the covenant is that the Lord will be their God and they will be His people. This is not new; rather, it is the reestablishment of what the Lord promised to do.

### **God's Word for Today**

120. Weeping often goes along with repentance and confession. The people of Israel also wept over their sins. The Lord loves to do nothing more than to save His people by forgiving their sins. We worship the Lord by receiving His forgiveness in Christ in the Means of Grace.

121. In worship, Jesus comes to serve His people. Jesus came to serve, not to be served, and to give His life as a ransom for us (Matthew 20:28). After our Lord serves us with forgiveness and eternal life, we go out and serve our neighbor with the love that Christ just bestowed upon us.

# Lesson 11

## Nehemiah's Final Acts

**Theme verse:** *Remember me, O my God, for good.*  
Nehemiah 13:31b

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- note that the Lord uses His people to accomplish His work on earth;
- understand that we are always in need of repentance and forgiveness;
- rejoice that God has included us in His plan of salvation.

### The Lists Showing What the Lord Did through Nehemiah

122. Up until this time, the city of Jerusalem was primarily inhabited by the leaders of the people. Yet Jerusalem was for all the people of God. Now Nehemiah brings others in. He also had to make sure that their family histories and tribes were legitimate, that the priests came from priestly families, and so on.
123. Ezra and Nehemiah reestablished the teaching of the Law of God in the city. Many of the abuses were corrected. The city was being set apart for the Lord's use, most especially for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, a few centuries later.

124. The completion of the wall, which protected the people inside from physical harm as well as evil spiritual influence from the unbelievers living in the land, showed that the Lord had honored His promise. Jerusalem was restored as the city of God. He dwelled among His people, who knew that the Lord would soon deliver on His promise to send His Messiah. The people were joyful because the Lord had saved and rescued them from their enemies.

### **Service at the Temple**

125. Apparently in Nehemiah's absence (and we presume that Ezra was dead by then, since he arrived before Nehemiah), some laxity developed in the practice at the temple. Levites and priests apparently had married foreign women. Some of the reforms that Nehemiah first put in place were no longer in effect.

### **Nehemiah's Final Reforms**

126. During Nehemiah's time away from Jerusalem, the people of Israel started to intermarry with the unbelieving people of the land again. Nehemiah already had instituted these reforms. The people fell away and needed to repent.

127. During Nehemiah's absence, the Levites abandoned the house of God in order to work in their fields because the people were not paying their tithes and offerings, which supported the priests' work. Quite literally, the priests could not feed their families. So instead of watching their families go hungry and perhaps die, they abandoned their duties at the temple.

128. Paul takes an Old Testament analogy and applies it to the paying of church workers today. When Nehemiah returned to be the governor a second time, the priests did not receive food in the temple.

129. Nehemiah cleansed every foreign thing from the temple. He reestablished the duties of the priests. He provided the wood for the sacrifices—no small feat. He helped set Jerusalem apart for the Lord’s service. Ultimately, he helped pave the way for the Savior to be born in Bethlehem. Through Nehemiah’s accomplishments, God worked to bring about the salvation of the world.

### **God’s Word for Today**

130. Some commentators have taken Nehemiah’s final words, “Remember me, O my God, for good,” as boastful. Some have thought Nehemiah was rather pleased with his accomplishments and wanted the Lord to acknowledge them. Although Nehemiah was a sinner, these words are not prideful. Rather, they are a plea that the Lord would remember Nehemiah’s call to faithfulness. Though a sinner, he clung to the Lord’s promises. He asked the Lord to remember him for good despite the evil in his life and his failings. In Luther’s words, Nehemiah recognized that he was nothing but a “beggar” holding out his empty hand waiting for the Lord’s good gifts.

131. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show that the Lord dwells with His people. On one hand, God would dwell in the newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Yet that temple, like Solomon’s temple before and Herod’s temple after, pointed to Christ, the temple’s fulfillment. Even more, by His grace, all who believe and are baptized are part of God’s holy house, His spiritual temple, built on the immovable foundation of the apostolic and prophetic Word, with Christ our cornerstone. Thanks be to God for His faithfulness to His promises and His gracious presence among us through Christ, our Lord!



