

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Ezra & Nehemiah

SIXTY BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

Phil Moore

MONARCH
BOOKS

Introduction: God Wants You to Build with Him

*“He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of
our God and repair its ruins.”*

(Ezra 9:9)

I have spent the past couple of weeks building an eighteen-foot-long shed in my back garden. I would have finished it faster, only I wanted my children to help me.

There was something about watching the delight on the face of my nine-year-old son as he wielded a sledgehammer that warranted taking a little longer to clear the ground for building. There was a joy in seeing my daughter’s face get filthy from the dust of demolition that stopped me from working far faster on my own. When we downed tools to share a drink with friends who arrived to help with the construction work, none of us was looking at our watches. We were enjoying working together too much to regard our task as something irksome to be rushed through in order to get the job done. Working with your children takes much longer than working on your own but, as any father can tell you, it is generally more rewarding, more memorable and a lot more fun.

It shouldn’t surprise us that God feels the same way about working with us as his children. Our heavenly Father doesn’t really need our help. Having created the universe in just six days without us, he hardly needs a helping hand from us today. Yet the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah teach us repeatedly that God is a loving Father who delights to do his work in the world through his children. Again and again, the message of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is that *God wants you to build with him.*

These two books were originally a single volume in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was only about a thousand years ago that Bible translators split the book in two – initially as *1 Ezra* and *2 Ezra*, then later as *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*.¹ The long-held Jewish belief is that both books were written by Ezra.² Since the first two-and-a-half verses of Ezra are almost identical to the final two verses of 2 Chronicles, it is also the long-held Jewish belief that Ezra wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles too.³ If that is true, then we should view these books as an encouragement from one of God’s great builders in the past for us to take up our own places in the present as part of God’s construction team.

The Jewish nation had rejected the Lord’s call to build with him, preferring instead to build idols of wood, metal and stone. The Lord had disciplined them for their idolatry by inflicting upon them three crushing defeats and exiles – first in 605 BC, then in 597 BC and then finally in 586 BC. The third and final defeat had seen Jerusalem destroyed, the land of Judah absorbed into the Babylonian Empire and the few Jewish survivors hauled off into exile in Babylon. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, those three great Jewish defeats are mirrored by three great Jewish returns from exile, as the Lord calls his people to come back to the Promised Land and to build with him again.

Ezra 1–6 records the events of **the first return**, which took place in 538 BC and which was all about **rebuilding a**

¹ Not to be confused with *1 Esdras* and *2 Esdras*, which are very different books in the Old Testament Apocrypha. Although those books purport to have been written by Ezra, they were written centuries after Ezra’s death and in Greek and Latin, instead of in the Hebrew and Aramaic of Ezra and Nehemiah.

² Ezra was a scribe who, in about 430 BC, drew up a comprehensive record of the Jewish return from exile. He quotes freely from Nehemiah’s diary, stating openly in Nehemiah 1:1 that these are “*the words of Nehemiah*”.

³ Ezra’s writings are rather like the *Star Wars* saga, since it appears that he wrote Ezra-Nehemiah first, then backtracked to write 1 and 2 Chronicles as prequels. The overlap between 2 Chronicles 36:21–22 and Ezra 1:1–3a is reminiscent of the end of *Rogue One* and the beginning of *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

Temple. It was led by Prince Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, who quickly discovered that the task of rebuilding was far too difficult for them. Ezra uses this to remind us that God does not ask us to build with him because he needs our help, but simply because he loves to partner with his children. He could have rebuilt the Temple on his own, but he chose to work through his people in order to deepen their friendship with him. As you read about the first return from exile, Ezra reassures you that, despite your own shortcomings, *God wants you to build with him*.

Ezra 7–10 records the events of **the second return**, which took place in around 458 BC and which was all about **rebuilding a nation**. Ezra led this return personally and he found it hard to muster many Jewish exiles to follow him on the long journey back to the land of Judah. He was forced to press-gang priests from the reluctant tribe of Levi, which reassures us that God’s construction team does not have to be big to succeed. God doesn’t strike up a partnership with his people because he needs assistance, but because he sees it as a great way to deepen his friendship with them and to train them for greater partnership with him in the future. Ezra wrote these chapters to remind God’s people of his great plan for them. He repeats that *God wants you to build with him*.

Nehemiah 1–13 records the events of **the third return**, which took place in around 444 BC and which was all about **rebuilding a city**. Nehemiah could only find a handful of Jewish exiles who would weep with him over the ruined walls of Jerusalem and who would join him on the long journey back home. Even after mobilising the Jews to rebuild the city with him, he found God’s people beset by division, discouragement and danger. Yet again, this reminds us that the Lord does not strike up a partnership with us because he needs our help. He is a loving Father who delights to do his building work with his beloved children in order to deepen their precious friendship with him. Still today, this remains the primary reason why *God wants you to build with him*.

Ezra and Nehemiah tend to be neglected books of the Bible, which is tragic because their message could not be more relevant to us today. In a generation where the Church can seem like just another social club to non-believers, we need the rebuilders of the Temple to teach us how to fill the world with awe at the presence of God. In a generation where the Church is often plagued with sin and compromise and scandal, we need the rebuilders of the Jewish nation to teach us how to embrace holiness as God's people. In a generation where the Church has lost much of its size and influence, we need the rebuilders of the walls of Jerusalem to show us how the Body of Christ can reverse its many weaknesses and build back more strongly today.

So thank you for allowing me to take you on a journey through Ezra and Nehemiah. As we study those who partnered with God in the rebuilding of Old Jerusalem, my prayer is that you will be equipped to partner with him in the building of the New Jerusalem. Ezra 9:9 encourages us to believe that this lies at the heart of God's purpose in our salvation: *"He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins"*.

In other words, Ezra calls you to get ready for action as you read, because *God wants you to build with him*.

Part One: Ezra 1–6

First Return: Rebuilding a Temple

Midway Through the Story (Ezra 1:1–6)

“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia.”

(Ezra 1:1)

The book of Ezra begins midway through the story. For us to understand its message, we need to understand some of the events which led up to the early months of 538 BC.

For a start, we need to know about *the story of the Persian Empire*. Cyrus was a cattle herder from Anshan, an obscure province in the empire of the Medes. Having declared himself king of Anshan in 559 BC, he shocked the world with a series of unlikely military victories. Against all odds, he overthrew the Median Empire in 549 BC, defeated King Croesus of Lydia in 547 BC and breached the impregnable walls of Babylon in 539 BC. When the book of Ezra begins in *“the first year of Cyrus king of Persia”*, it isn’t referring to the first year of his rule, but to the year in which he became the undisputed ruler of the world. Cyrus commanded the largest empire that the world had ever seen, stretching all the way from India to the Mediterranean Sea.¹

We also need to know about *the story of the Jewish exile*. When the northern tribes of Israel refused to build with God and instead built temples to pagan idols, the Lord handed

¹ King Cyrus the Great of Persia ruled from 559 to 530 BC. This was his *“first year”* as ruler of the world, but his twenty-first year as king of Anshan.

them over to destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BC.² When the southern kingdom of Judah likewise refused to build with God, he sent prophets to warn them that similar destruction was also heading their way. Jeremiah prophesied that they would be slaughtered by the Babylonians and that only a tiny remnant of Jews would survive to be taken into exile in Babylon. He also prophesied that the Persians would breach the walls of Babylon and send those few survivors back home to rebuild their Temple seventy years after it was destroyed.³ Isaiah had further prophesied that the ruler of those Persians would be named Cyrus, predicting his rise to power a century before he was even born.⁴

We therefore need to know about *the story of Daniel*, whose faithful witness to the Lord in exile led directly to the miracle of 538 BC. When Babylon fell to the Persians in October 539 BC, there was no reason to expect that life would be any better for the Jewish exiles under their new Persian masters than it had been for them under the Babylonians. The prophet Daniel had been taken into exile in 605 BC, however, so he became convinced that Jeremiah’s seventy years were almost up and that King Cyrus was about to send the Jews back home. When the new governor of Babylon banned any prayer to God for thirty days, Daniel kept on believing. When the governor threw him into the lions’ den for praying fervently to God, and when the Lord delivered Daniel’s life from the lions, the governor of Babylon began believing too. He was so astonished by what he saw that he sent a proclamation across the Persian Empire declaring

² This is why the only tribes mentioned in 1:5 are *Judah, Benjamin and Levi*. A few survivors from the northern tribes would also make it home (Luke 2:36), but from now on the Israelites would be known as *Jews* – that is, as the descendants of the tribe of Judah, whose homeland was now renamed *Judea*.

³ Jeremiah 25:11–14; 27:19–22; 29:10 and 32:36–38.

⁴ The naming of Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 is one of the most stunning predictions in the Old Testament.

that the God of Israel was the true God that everybody ought to fear.⁵

When Cyrus read this proclamation in early 538 BC, it triggered a royal edict of his own. There was no particular reason why he should overturn the long-standing policy of the Babylonian Empire that its subject peoples must renounce their own local gods in favour of the gods of Babylon, yet suddenly he did so. Archaeologists have found a royal edict in the ruins of Babylon, in which King Cyrus prays, “*May all the gods that I have returned to their sanctuaries ask Marduk and Nebo daily that I may have a long life.*”⁶ The opening verses of the book of Ezra suggest that his new policy of religious tolerance was provoked by the courageous witness of Daniel and his fellow Jews.

First, Cyrus describes the Lord as “*the God of heaven*”. This is a phrase that occurs twenty-two times in the Old Testament, nearly always when recording events that take place in Assyria, Babylon or Persia. The phrase appears to have been one of the primary ways in which the Jews communicated that their God was greater than any of the pagan deities. After hearing about Daniel and the lions’ den, Cyrus seems to accept that this is true.

Second, Cyrus confesses that his surprise ascent from cattle herder to world ruler is the miraculous work of the God of Israel. Perhaps Daniel showed him Isaiah’s prophecies that refer to him by name. Perhaps Daniel told him about Jeremiah’s seventy years or about Ezekiel’s vision of a new Temple for the God of Israel. Whatever his motivations, this royal edict of Cyrus marks a stunning turnaround for the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

⁵ Daniel 9:1–3 took place a few weeks before Daniel 6:1–28. Daniel was only part right, since Jeremiah was actually predicting that the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed in 586 BC, would be reopened in 516 BC (Ezra 6:15–16). God responded to his faith anyway, using Daniel’s prayers to inspire the royal edict in Ezra 1.

⁶ Known as The “Cyrus Cylinder”, this royal edict is now on display in the British Museum in London. Marduk (also known as Bel) and Nebo were the two main gods of Babylon, revealing that Cyrus only went so far in his new-found faith in the God of Israel.

Cyrus not only allows them to return home to the Promised Land, but he also decrees that the Persians ought to fund the rebuilding of their Temple!

To understand this final sentence of his royal edict, we need to know *the story of God’s plan of salvation*. When the Lord rescued the Hebrew slaves from Egypt so that they could build a tabernacle for his presence and a new nation for his glory, he demonstrated his saving power by helping them to plunder their Egyptian masters of their treasures. The book of Ezra therefore depicts the return from Babylon as a “Second Exodus” by telling us that the Jewish captives were allowed to plunder their Persian masters as they went home to rebuild their Temple and their nation.⁷

The book of Ezra therefore starts midway through a much bigger story. To understand its opening verses, we need to know about the Persian Empire, about the Jewish exile, about the prophet Daniel and about God’s plan of salvation. As we read through Ezra and Nehemiah together, we will discover that they point towards a third and final Exodus for God’s people too – a final Exodus led by Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter-turned-Temple-builder, who has now become the leader of God’s construction team.⁸

So as you read these verses, don’t imagine that they are nothing more than ancient history. Ezra and Nehemiah are only midway through the story themselves. As you read these verses, Jesus is calling you to carry on the story through your partnership with him. He is inviting you to believe that *God wants you to build with him*.

⁷ Ezra 1:4–6 echoes Exodus 12:36. Since Exodus and Ezra are the second and the second-to-last books of the Old Testament in many Hebrew manuscripts, there is a glorious symmetry to this “Second Exodus”. The return from Babylon is also depicted as a “Second Exodus” in Isaiah 11:11–16 and Jeremiah 16:14–15.

⁸ Jesus is revealed to be the descendant of Zerubbabel in Matthew 1:12–17 and the true Temple Builder in John 2:19–21. He even has a conversation with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration, in Luke 9:30–31, in which the Greek text uses the word *exodus* to describe his work of salvation for God’s people.

The Wake-up Call (Ezra 1:1–6)

“The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus... everyone whose heart God had moved.”

(Ezra 1:1, 5)

When I became a Christian over twenty-five years ago, my young friends and I were encouraged to sing songs about how we were going to be history-makers for God. A quarter of a century later, it hasn't really turned out that way. The Church in the Western world has continued to lose size and influence all around us. Many of those young friends are now spiritually jaded, their dreams a shadow of before, which is tragic because we serve the God who saves the best till last and who wants our experience of him to burn brighter and brighter as we grow older.¹ I think that we misunderstood what it meant for us to build with God and that it has damaged many of us spiritually.

That's why I love the opening verses of the book of Ezra. They are a much-needed wake-up call for anybody who wants to enjoy being part of God's construction team for the long haul. There is nothing here to fuel the self-important songs of would-be history-makers, because the truth is that none of us can become history-makers on our own. The builder in the opening verses of the book of Ezra is unequivocally God. He doesn't offer to come and build with us. He calls us to come and build with him, and there is a mountain of difference between the two.

King Cyrus may have imagined that his new policy of religious tolerance was his own idea, but the first verse of Ezra

¹ Proverbs 4:18, John 2:10 and 2 Corinthians 3:18.

insists that it originated with God. We are told that *“the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation”* and that he did so *“in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.”* A more literal translation of the original Hebrew text is that *“the Lord woke up the spirit of Cyrus.”*² This was not a partnership of equals. Cyrus was spiritually asleep until God prompted him to rebuild the ruined Temple in Jerusalem.³ The Lord alone is the true Builder.

The Jewish exiles should have already known this from the book of Jeremiah, where the Lord describes King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as *“my servant”* and his army as *“my war club, my weapon for battle”*.⁴ The rulers of the earth may view themselves as mighty empire-builders, but they are merely items in the toolbox of the true and better Builder.

In verse 5, the same Hebrew phrase is used to tell us literally that the Lord also *“woke up the spirits”* of the Jewish exiles who responded to this call to rebuild his Temple. It is rather humbling to realise that every time we partner with God, we don't pay off our debt of gratitude towards him. We become even more indebted to his grace because we would never partner with him unless his Spirit stirred our own spirits to build with him. In case we miss this, the prophet Haggai uses this exact same Hebrew phrase in Haggai 1:14 to tell us literally that *“The Lord woke up the spirit of Zerubbabel... and the spirit of Joshua... and the spirit of all of the rest of the people, and they*

² The word *‘ur* in Ezra 1:1 and 5 means *to awaken* or *to incite*. The word *rūach* in Ezra 1:1 and 5 means *spirit*. This same unusual phrase is also used in 1 Chronicles 5:26 and 2 Chronicles 21:16, which adds support to the long-held Jewish view that Ezra wrote those two books of the Bible in addition to Ezra and Nehemiah.

³ Note that the focus in these opening verses is not on the return of the Jewish exiles, exciting though that is. It is on the rebuilding of God's Temple. Building problems tend to flow from thinking too much of ourselves.

⁴ Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom are described as God's servant, club, weapon, hammer and goblet in Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10; 50:23; 51:7 and 51:20–23.

came and began to work on the house of the Lord.”⁵ The Jews who set out on this first return from exile might have fooled themselves that they were building something for God, but the Scriptures are very clear that they only started work for God because he had first started work in them.

In verse 6, this same principle is at work among the pagans who contributed to the rebuilding of the Temple. The same Hebrew phrase is not used, but we are meant to sense it as the Persians respond to the royal edict by gladly sacrificing their riches to fund the rebuilding of the Lord’s Temple. When did your own neighbours last turn up on your doorstep to offer you their valuables in order to further your church’s mission? If they are anything like my neighbours then the answer is “never”! What happens in these opening verses of the book of Ezra is therefore an amazing miracle. It is meant to teach us that the resources that we need to build with God aren’t our own. They are always a grace gift from God to us.

Here we find the remedy for disappointed Christians everywhere. This is the truth which sets us free to become glad builders with God. Whenever we become discouraged that our culture seems resistant to the Gospel, we can remind ourselves that Cyrus would not have lifted a finger to help God’s people had the Holy Spirit not awakened his heart. In order to prove this, Ezra gives us a copy of his royal edict in Hebrew in 1:2–4, as he worded it for his Jewish subjects, as well as a copy of that same royal edict in Aramaic in 6:3–5, as he worded it for everybody else. Comparing the two shows us how much Cyrus hammed up his devotion to the God of Israel.⁶ If God could stir the heart of a devious out-and-out pagan like Cyrus, then he can also do the same with the leaders of our own culture too.

⁵ Isaiah 51:17 and 52:1 also use the Hebrew word *‘ur* when they command the Jewish exiles to “Wake up!” and join the Lord’s construction team in order to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem.

⁶ We saw in the previous chapter that he confesses freely in the “Cyrus Cylinder” that he is still serving Marduk and Nebo, the two patron gods of Babylon.

Whenever we feel discouraged that many Christians seem resigned to the Church’s failure and satisfied with life in modern-day Babylon, we can remind ourselves that nobody ever poured their life into rebuilding the House of God unless the Lord first awakened their spirit to do so. We cannot cajole people into action through our own leadership ability. We can only pray for the Lord to do that work within them.

Whenever we feel discouraged that our non-believing friends and neighbours seem to show little interest in the Gospel, we can remind ourselves that the Persians were uninterested in the God of Israel too, until the Holy Spirit stirred their hearts to play their part in God’s great plan of salvation. That same Holy Spirit is now at work in our own non-believing friends and neighbours as we faithfully witness to them today.

Furthermore, there is a New Testament conclusion to these verses. In Matthew 16:17–18, Jesus is training his apostles to build God’s New Covenant Temple after his ascension, when suddenly he witnesses the Holy Spirit awakening Peter’s heart to spiritual truth. He exclaims with delight:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.

I will build my church. I will build my church. Those words belong in the mouth of Jesus, not in the mouth of Christians singing worship songs about their own importance in God’s plans. Whenever we forget this and try to build in our own strength for God, we set ourselves up for failure and disappointment. But whenever we remember that the true Builder is God, we are ready to be part of his construction team.