

December 2023
Memory Verse and Bible Reading Plan

*For if, because of one man's trespass,
death reigned through that one man,
much more will those who receive the abundance
of grace and the free gift of righteousness
reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.
Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation
for all men, so one act of righteousness
leads to justification and life for all men.
Romans 5:17-18*



Reading Ezra and Nehemiah

In the Hebrew Bible, just as Samuel, Kings and Chronicles were written as one book, so also Ezra and Nehemiah were written together. In fact, in some cases, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were all written into one book. While you are reading these two books, consider reading Zechariah and Haggai at the same time to get the whole context of the time.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the new king over defeated Babylon, God moved in the heart of this pagan king to decree that the Jews who had been exiled for 70 years could return to their homeland. The Jews return to Israel in three waves over a period of a hundred years. The book of Ezra records the first two waves of migration back, one under Zerubbabel, the second under Ezra. Nehemiah records the third wave.

Zerubbabel took up the task of rebuilding the altar and the Temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls and gates. Ezra rebuilt the people's spiritual relationship with God through teaching God's Law and calling them to obedience.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah had to do what they did against great opposition, and formidable challenges. Why would God do it this way? Most people read these books as a history of two men who did great things for God despite much resistance and hardship. As you read, change your perspective and think of God building something for God and God building and shaping Ezra and Nehemiah. When we do things for God and face many challenges, consider what God might be doing in you?

These books are a great encouragement to God's people, reminding them that no matter what happens, God is still and always the God of His people and Lord over their history. He can never leave or forsake His own.

The purpose of these three returns is ultimately to prepare for the coming Messiah and the restoration of the kingdom. However, each return also includes the many reforms that the people must make along the way. God is continuing His work. The work is not just buildings but hearts.

The story of the Old Testament ends with the book of Nehemiah. All the rest of the books in our Bible after Nehemiah are scattered chronologically throughout Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. After a four hundred year silence God will resume his story with the coming of the Messiah. The end of the Old Testament is one of anticipation, the anticipation of the good news of the gospel in the coming Messiah.

Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah each contain one of the great intercessory prayers of the Bible (Ezra 9:5–15 and Nehemiah 9; see Daniel 9 and John 17 for others). We are reminded of the crucial role of prayer in every endeavor, great or small.

Even after 70 years of God's discipline in exile, God's people still struggle with sin. Our old nature doesn't die easily. We must constantly confess and repent and seek God to reform our ways. The people face lots of enemies but their greatest enemy was within their heart. The last books of the OT history don't end riding off into the sunset with a happy ending. Our battle with sin continues to the very end.

Our hearts are the most important temple. God dwells with us in a much more personal and intimate way now by dwelling in our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Don't neglect repairing and rebuilding through repentance, Scripture, prayer and worship. God has created and called His people to be worshipers and He sovereignly works His purposes to that end.

In Nehemiah 8 we see the supreme importance of the preaching of the Word of God to bring reformation and revival to souls. May the Spirit of God bring us under the same conviction as we read and study and hear and love the Word of God.

Outline:

Zerubbabel's return and rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1–6), Ezra's later return to teach the law (Ezra 7–10) Nehemiah rebuilds the wall around Jerusalem (Neh. 1-7), Ezra teaches the law, rebuilds the morals (Neh. 8-13)

Reading the Minor Prophets

The Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, are listed first not because of importance but because of the length of their books. The Minor Prophets are minor only because their books are shorter, and it may be that these twelve all fit on one manuscript or papyrus scroll.

Through the themes of sin, judgment, and restoration, they detail Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness and the eschatological promise of divine faithfulness. Clearly God is up to something and He deems it very important.

The Prophets saw everything in relation to God, everything. The rise and fall of kings and nations, the plagues of locust in Joel and whoring after idols in Hosea and the storm that got Jonah tossed overboard, and the rise of wicked nations that defeated the people of God.

The Prophets call us out of superficiality. The Prophets call us out of secularism and materialism. The Prophets call us out of the incipient atheism that dominates our culture and our media and our education.

The Prophets remind us that we do not live in a closed universe, but in an open universe. The Prophets reminds us that there is a God and He is here and He is not silent, He has spoken loud and clear.

Finally the Prophets remind us what matters most. That there is a coming Messiah. God has invaded our world and come in the flesh. This matters supremely. This changes everything. This turns our world upside down. This changes how you and think about today and tomorrow and next week and the year ahead. God is moving and He is writing His history through our world and our lives.

There are ***three major historical events around which all the writing prophets prophesied.*** Each of these three events have a group of prophets who addressed these key events.

Hosea, Amos and Jonah are the earliest. ***Hosea and Amos*** are the only two to prophecy to the northern kingdom of Israel before it was led into exile by the Assyrians. This would be from around 760 to 722 BC.

Jonah was a prophet of Israel who went to Nineveh, which was the capital of the hated nation of Assyria.

All the rest of the Minor Prophets prophesied to Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. Six prophecy before Judah goes into exile in 587BC, ***Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk***; and the last three, ***Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*** are prophets in Judah after Judah returns from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah from around 536 to 430 BC.

How are these books relevant to us? Listen to four things going on then and see if it doesn't sound familiar.

First, it was a time of unprecedented economic, social, political and military upheaval. The world was changing dramatically. All of this could describe our nation and our world.

Second, it was a time of enormous religious unfaithfulness and disregard for the Ten Commandments, a time of rebellion, idolatry and rampant disobedience against God and His law. There was a mixing of religions and religious practices and a pursuit of spiritualism. Again this describes our culture and our context. Especially interesting to know is that decline in Israel followed a period of unprecedented prosperity and success and growth.

Third, it was a time of shifting populations and national boundaries. Whole populations were being moved, immigration and migration on huge scales. We see the immigration issue in our own country and the forced movement of populations in the middle east and Africa.

Fourth, the nation of Israel was permanently divided. A nation divided will not stand. Our nation is split just about down the middle into red states and blue states. Other nations today face division, Korea, Sudan, Nigeria, Middle East.

The Minor Prophets stand out as particularly applicable in this coming election, and in light of world events. Much of what is written in the Minor Prophets could be tomorrow's headlines. Political intrigue, wars and rumors of wars, changes in power structures, old régimes falling and new ones rising.

Where is God in this and what is God saying to us today? These ancient words are still and forever true.

Bible Reading Plan - December

- 1 Jeremiah 43-44
- 2 Lamentations 1-2
- 3 Lamentations 3-5
- 4 2 Chronicles 36:22-23
- 5 Ezra 1-2
- 6 Ezra 3-4
- 7 Haggai 1-2
- 8 Zechariah 1-3
- 9 Zechariah 4-6
- 10 Zechariah 7-9
- 11 Zechariah 10-12
- 12 Zechariah 11-14
- 13 Ezra 5-6
- 14 Esther 1-2
- 15 Esther 3-4
- 16 Esther 5-6
- 17 Esther 7-8
- 18 Esther 9-10
- 19 Ezra 7-10
- 20 Nehemiah 1-3
- 21 Nehemiah 4-6
- 22 Nehemiah 7-9
- 23 Nehemiah 10-13
- 24 Malachi 1-2
- 25 Malachi 3-4