

Bible Reading Notes

November 2020 – Ezra-Nehemiah

How to use these Bible reading notes

These Bible reading notes are a resource to help you feed on God's word a little and often and allow it to change your life. If you miss a day (or several!), don't feel guilty or try to catch up; just pick up wherever you left off – it doesn't matter if it's the wrong date.

Here are some tips on how to get the most out of this:

1. Find a time and place where you can be quiet but awake. Maybe set an alarm on your phone to remind you each day.
2. Pray: ask God to help you understand what he says.
3. Use the notes to help you think about the passage (use a good translation of the Bible like the NIV).
 - *'Read'* tells you which verses to read
 - *'Apply'* shows how it affects you
 - *'Pray'* suggests ways to talk to God about it
4. Pray about what you have read. You might also like to use the Church Prayer Diary.
5. Look for a chance to share with someone what God has been saying to you.

These notes are easy to install on most phones or tablets. Install the 'PrayerMate' App and you'll find it under 'Add Subject → Church Life → UK Churches → St.Philemon's → Bible Notes'. You can also find them on our website: www.stphilemons.co.uk. If you have any problems, email miriam@stphilemons.co.uk.

Welcome to Persia!

It's been almost 70 years since Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem & exiled the people of Judah to Babylon. The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel have all been proclaiming God's sovereignty, and that he will keep his promises to restore His people to worship him.

Now, Ezra-Nehemiah tells the story of God keeping those promises through his 'Project:Restoration.' The temple and the city of Jerusalem are ruined and will be rebuilt, but all along God's real goal is to restore his people.

2500 years later, God's goal hasn't changed. In Christ, God is still at work through his people, by his word. He is guiding history to call people to himself and restore them to live lives of worship, centred on him. How does this 'Project:Restoration' impact your everyday life? Ezra-Nehemiah gives us a glimpse...

Sunday 1st November

Welcome to Ezra-Nehemiah!

God's people have been exiled in Babylon for 70 years. Ezra-Nehemiah was originally 1 book in 2 halves which tells the story of God's 'Project:Restoration' after Israel's exile in Babylon.

Today we'll focus on 2 earlier passages which help us understand what happens in the book.

Read 2 Chronicles 36v15-19

- What are God's reasons for bringing this disaster on his people?

Read Jeremiah 29v10-14

- What promises does God make to his people?
- If you were a Hebrew in exile, how would these promises give you hope?

Apply

Ezra-Nehemiah will show us that God's Word drives history for God's purposes, to God's glory.

- Where in your life do you need reminding of God's control over history at the moment?
- How can you encourage others by reminding them of God's purposes for his glory and his people's good?

Monday 2nd November

Political changes can bring turmoil and anxiety at the best of times. King Cyrus' arrival on the stage of history as leader of a new superpower is one of the biggest ever shifts. But God stands behind it all...

Read Ezra 1v1-6

- How does Ezra emphasise God's activity to bring these events about?
- How does God's activity impact the individual lives of his people as well as events on the world stage?

Read Ezra 1v7-11

God's people have been exiled for 70 years. They may have wondered if God had actually been defeated when Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem

- Why is the return of the temple articles so important?

Apply

God is at work as the director of history to fulfil his promises to restore his people

- Which of God's promises to his people in Jesus do you find hard to believe or trust?
- How does Ezra 1 encourage or reassure you in our world today?

Tuesday 3rd November

The Bible's accounts of great events may sometimes seem lofty and remote. The lists of names in Ezra-Nehemiah may seem dull or difficult to read, but they remind us that God's purposes for history involve ordinary people too!

Read Ezra 2v1-18

We hear nothing more about these people than their family names and how many they are.

- How does it encourage you that their names are recorded here?

Read Ezra 2v36-39 and 61-63

Almost one tenth of those returning are priests who will enable worship in the temple! But even then, worship must be conducted in a way authorised by God (v61-63)

- What does this tell us about the place of worship among God's people?

Apply

- Where do you look for significance? As you trust in Jesus, how does your inclusion among God's people direct that quest?
- How can you make worship, and displaying God's glory the goal of your every-day?

Wednesday 4th November

Once the people have returned to the land, they begin to seek God and to make him central in faithful worship.

Read Ezra 3v1-6

- How do the exiles respond in and despite their fear?
- In what ways does their worship remind them of all God has done for them?

Even in this joyful moment, it is clear this isn't 'it'. There needs to be more to come if Project:Restoration is to be completed.

Read Ezra 3v10-13

- What are the reasons for the exiles' mixed emotions?

Apply

- How does the response of the exiles challenge you in your fears?
- The exiles aren't yet truly 'home' because their return is only a shadow of the way Jesus will bring us home to himself. As we wait for that, how will longing for your true home help you move towards God?

Thursday 5th November

God's purposes are opposed wherever people refuse to have him as God alone.

Read Ezra 4v1-5

- How does Ezra highlight the opposition to the exiles?
- What do you think are Zerubbabel's reasons for rejecting help?

Zerubbabel had very good reasons to reject these people

Read 2 Kings 17v24-28 and 40-41

- What were the dangers for God's people in joining with these people?
- How do people challenge the exclusivity of Jesus today?

Apply

- What sort of opposition to Christianity makes you feel most unsure? Pray about it.
- How might you be tempted to water down Jesus' uniqueness as God's King and our only Saviour?

Friday 6th November

God's plans in history have been opposed since Gen 3 by a mixture of half-truths and outright lies, but God's faithfulness never ends.

Read Ezra 4v6-8

Verses 6-23 fast-forward about 100 years to more opposition.

- How does including this flash-forward highlight the relentless nature of opposition to God and his people?

Read Ezra 4v23-24

Verse 24 happened 100 years before verse 23. The first readers of Ezra are experiencing the opposition under King Artaxerxes (and—spoiler alert!—live after the temple was completed!)

- How might hearing about the opposition experienced by generations in the past encourage the exiles facing opposition in their own day?
- Given that the temple was completed in the 6th year of King Darius' reign (see 6v15), how would 4v24 remind the first readers of God's faithfulness despite opposition?

Apply

- All through history, God keeps his promises despite relentless opposition – how does that help you to trust him today?

Saturday 7th November

God's people may falter and lose heart in the face of opposition, but God's word is always powerful in spurring us on to keep serving him.

Read Ezra 5v1-2

- Who and what does God provide to get the builders and building work going again?

Read Haggai 1v1-8 and 13-15

Haggai and Zechariah preach during the events of Ezra. They encourage the people to keep serving God and making him central even with all the opposition around.

- How does God (through Haggai) motivate his people to get working again?
- What have been the effects of neglecting God's plans for his people?

Apply

God's word is effective in stirring up his people to serve him. The Old Testament temple points forward to the New Testament church - we don't need to build the temple anymore, but God's church is still being built.

- In what ways does God's word spur us on to be involved in building the church? (*e.g. by telling people about Jesus*) How does God's word encourage you to keep going with God's work? (*E.g. consider Jesus' promise in Matthew 28v20*)

Sunday 8th November

Despite continuing opposition God powerfully provides all that is needed to see his work done, and even oversees details like Ancient Filing Systems (see Ezra 6v1-2)!

Read Ezra 5v17-6v8

Another letter to the Persian king (much more reasonable than the letter in chapter 4) results in a much more reasonable response

- How do the details of these verses highlight God's detailed provision for his people and his plans?

Read Ezra 6v13-15

- How does Ezra emphasise God at work behind the successful building work?

Apply

God will provide all that is needed to see his work completed, in us and in others.

- In what ways can you see evidence of God's powerful provision in your life?
- How does God's powerful provision to see his work done influence the way you might pray for family or friends who don't know Christ?

Monday 9th November

The struggle has been real, but the temple is completed. God's people take great joy in his 'Project:Restoration'. Where do you tend to find the most joy in your life?

Read Ezra 6v15-18

- How do the exiles celebrate the completed temple?

Read Ezra 6v19-22

- What do the exiles celebrate *after* the temple celebration? What are they looking back to?

Apply

- What features of this worship (celebrating the restored temple, their restoration as God's people, remembering God's gracious rescue at the Passover) most resonate with you?

Our relationship with God is centred on Jesus who identifies himself as the ultimate temple, the meeting place of God and humanity (John 2v19)

- How can you rejoice as you see God restoring his people in Jesus?

Tuesday 10th November

The temple has been completed but 'Project:Restoration' is not complete. God stirs Ezra's heart to return to Jerusalem and be his means of 'people-restoration'.

Read Ezra 7v1-7 and 7v27-28

- Why does Ezra decide to head back to Jerusalem, and why is he successful?
- How does this echo the return of the original exiles back in Ezra 1v1-5?

Read Ezra 7v8-10

- What is Ezra's aim in returning to Jerusalem?

Apply

God builds his people through his word as it is taught and applied... His building methods haven't changed since Ezra's day!

- How do you feel about the idea that God's plan to restore his people is a preacher?
- What would it look like for you to devote yourself to God's word?

Wednesday 11th November

Once again Ezra-Nehemiah treats us to a list of people who we will not hear anything else about, in Ezra 8v1-14! God provides people to accomplish his work and provides them with all they need.

Read Ezra 8v15-20

- What is needed and how is it provided?
- How do Ezra's actions relate to his trust in God to provide?

Read Ezra 8v31-32

- What is needed and how is it provided?
- What do you notice about the repeated phrases Ezra uses? (Compare 8v18 and 8v31)

Apply

God has chosen Ezra as his instrument for his 'Project:Restoration'. Once again, he provides all that is needed to get his work done.

- How do these sections encourage you to take action to serve God while trusting him to provide all you need? How can you do that this week?

Thursday 12th November

When God's word is preached it reveals truth about him and about us, and that isn't always comfortable. What will be the effect of Ezra's ministry?

Read Ezra 9v1-4

- What is the serious issue that has arisen?
- How does Ezra respond?

Read Exodus 34v11-16

- Why is the issue of intermarriage so serious?
What is God protecting?

Apply

God's people are called to be distinct as a people who worship God exclusively. God's people are no longer defined by race, but by being in Christ. And our distinctiveness remains important as we worship.

- What steps might you need to take to ensure you worship God alone, and no other?
- How can you cultivate a right disgust at your own sin that leaves you 'appalled' (Ezra 9v3)?

Friday 13th November

Ezra's arrival and ministry teaching God's word has brought conviction of sin among God's people. Will they respond with godly sorrow (2 Cor 7v10)?

Read Ezra 9v5-9

- How does Ezra identify with the rest of God's people?
- How does Ezra move towards God openly in prayer, rather than hiding?

Read Ezra 9v10-15

- What does Ezra freely admit?
- Look again at v5. What is significant about the *time* of Ezra's prayer? What can he see happening as he prays?

Apply

We have a much greater sacrifice as we confess sin. Ezra sees an animal slaughtered. We can confess our sin with Jesus' cross before our eyes, confident we will receive forgiveness.

- How can you grow to see the seriousness of sin more clearly?
- Spend some time in confession with the eyes of your faith firmly fixed on the cross.

Saturday 14th November

Confession of sin is only the first step of godly sorrow. True godly sorrow always leads to genuine repentance. The actions taken may be mixed, but *“some sins have such complex tentacles that it is not surprising if solutions undertaken by repentant sinners are messy as well.”* (Don Carson)

Read Ezra 10v1-4

- How do the other leaders respond to Ezra’s prayer of confession?

Read Ezra 10v7-14

- How do the people as a whole show their agreement?
- In what ways does their response demonstrate a desire to carefully repent of sin?

Apply

It is possible to engage in false repentance, turning from sin for wrong reasons, or turning towards things other than God. The exiles repent out of a hatred for sin and desire for God.

- What can you do to cultivate a deeper hatred of sin?
- What can you do to cultivate a deeper love for and hope in God?

Sunday 15th November

As we transition from Ezra to Nehemiah, progress has been made but the great city of God's people remains a near-ruin. How do we respond when the reputation of the church is at best an irrelevant relic?

Read Nehemiah 1v1-4

- What is the news that Nehemiah hears?
- Why do you think he responds in such a heartfelt way?

Read Nehemiah 1v5-11

- What different characteristics of God flowing through this prayer can you spot?
- How does Nehemiah's prayer relate to his plans?

Apply

Nehemiah is deeply passionate for God's glory, reflected in God's people.

- How can you cultivate a greater passion for God's glory?
- What effect should that have when you see God's people marginalised or shamed?
- Spend some time praying, reflecting on God's character and glory.

Monday 16th November

Nehemiah's prayerful response to the news of chapter 1 prompts definitive action. This is no small thing; he is asking the emperor for a complete reversal in imperial policy towards Jerusalem (see Ezra 4v18-23)

Read Nehemiah 2v1-4

- What is the mood of these verses? What is Nehemiah afraid of?
- How does Nehemiah demonstrate his reliance on and faith in God?

Read Nehemiah 2v5-10

- How does Nehemiah reveal the careful planning that has gone with his prayers?

Apply

Nehemiah acts boldly in God's service, fuelled by his prayers (chapter 1) and reliance on God. He doesn't know how things will pan-out but goes ahead anyway.

- How can you cultivate a greater dependence on God?
- In your life, where might God calling you to act in greater boldness for him?

Tuesday 17th November

When we have a job to do, especially when it is a job to be done 'for God' how tempting it can be to rush on ahead without carefully planning our steps.

Read Nehemiah 2v11-16

- How does Nehemiah's careful planning continue to show itself?

Read Nehemiah 2v17-20

God's restoration work has been opposed since the day it began in Genesis 3.

- What forms does the opposition to Nehemiah and the exiles take?
- How does Nehemiah's response reveal his confidence in God?

Apply

God's restoration work no longer involves buildings as it did in Nehemiah's day, but even then, the primary focus was *the people*. God is still restoring people to worship him now.

- Do you find opposition to God's work of building his church surprising?
- Reflect on Nehemiah 2v20. God grants success to his people in his work. Call on him for help and confidence in the circumstances where it is hard to keep serving him.

Wednesday 18th November

Ezra-Nehemiah is about much more than rebuilding a city. God is restoring his people. He uses the service of ordinary people for him to do his work in the people themselves.

Read Nehemiah 3v1-5

- How does this chapter honour those who worked for God's glory in Jerusalem?
- Notice Eliashib and the priests (v1) and the nobles of Tekoa (v5). What is the contrast between these two groups of leaders?

Read Nehemiah 3v20-21 and 27

- How does this chapter highlight the zeal of some of the builders for special mention?

If you have time, read through this whole chapter quickly. Notice the different names and remember each refers to an ordinary servant of God, honoured to be mentioned in the Bible!

Apply

It is very easy for us to forget the significance of the good works God gives us to do.

- How can this chapter encourage you to press on in serving God even in apparently unseen ways?

Thursday 19th November

Jesus promised opposition would come to his followers. Even that wasn't new. God's 'Project:Restoration' always faces both external and internal opposition. Today we see the external opposition.

Read Nehemiah 4v1-5 and 10-14

- What different forms does this external opposition take?
- How does Nehemiah respond?

Read Nehemiah 4v9, 4v20, 6v9 and 6v14-16

- How does Nehemiah's response to opposition show his trust in God?

Apply

- What forms of external opposition concern you most at the moment?
- How could you pray and act in response?

Friday 20th November

Opposition is not always external. Sin persists among God's people, and their division often seems to threaten 'Project:Restoration'. Yet, God is always faithful, even when his people are unfaithful.

Read Nehemiah 5v1-8

- How does selfishness among God's people show itself?

Read Nehemiah 5v9-12

- What is Nehemiah's diagnosis of the problem?
- What connects fear of God with faithful service and selflessness?

Apply

- How can selfishness among God's people show itself today?
- How can selfishness risk stopping you from displaying God's glory?

Saturday 21st November

The city-rebuilding work may be finished. The people-restoring work is just getting going.

Read Nehemiah 7v4-5

- What is Nehemiah's next concern and how is it prompted?
- What is the significance of Jerusalem's low population?

Review Nehemiah 7

This chapter is a direct repeat of Ezra 2, and the list of people who returned to Jerusalem

- How does this repeated list of very ordinary people remind you of your place among God's people?
- How does Nehemiah 7v73 emphasise the importance of the people rather than buildings?

Apply

God's restoration work has always been about people, not structures or buildings. He is in the business of restoring a people for himself in Jesus.

- How can you develop a greater focus on God's work in his people across the world?
- Spend some time praying for the growth of your church in both number and faith.

Sunday 22nd November

The most potent 'Project:Restoration' tool is God's word, through which he restores his people.

Read Nehemiah 8v1-4

- How many times can you spot Nehemiah noting that *all* the people were present?
- How does Nehemiah emphasise their attentiveness to God's word?

Read Nehemiah 8v5-8

- How would you characterise the people's response to God's word?
- What do Ezra and the other leaders do to ensure people understand?

Apply

As the Word of God, the Bible powerfully reveals God to us, speaks truth about ourselves, and transforms our lives as we meet Jesus and hear from our Creator. It is living and active (Hebrews 4v12).

- What is your usual response to God's Word?
- What would it look like for you to have the same attitude of reverent listening to God's Word as the people here?
- Spend some time praying for those who help explain God's Word to you.

Monday 23rd November

Listening reverently to God's word (see yesterday) results in acting on God's Word...

Read Nehemiah 8v9-12

- Why were the people weeping?
- What different attitude do Ezra and Nehemiah call the people to take and why?

Read Nehemiah 8v13-18

- What do the people do in response to God's Word?
- What are they celebrating? (See Deuteronomy 16v14)

Apply

The people were weeping, but it was not a time for weeping. It was a time for rejoicing and celebrating God's provision for them. In Jesus we have received abundant provision beyond all we could ask or imagine. We, too, are to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4v4)

- How could remembering God's character help you rejoice even in hard times, or even when you are convicted of your sin?
- How can you reflect on God's provision for you, and cultivate a deep joy in the Lord?

Tuesday 24th November

God's restoration work does not see his people ignoring their sin, as though rejoicing in him is all that's needed (see yesterday). Sin must be dealt with in response to God's mercy and grace.

Read Nehemiah 9v1-3

- How do the details of this event reveal the seriousness with which God's people are taking their confession of sin?

Read Nehemiah 9v4-15

- What do stories of God's grace and provision do the people recount?
- How do these stories remind the people of who God is?

Apply

One of the best motivations to humble confession is to remind ourselves of God's powerful grace and mercy towards us and towards his people in the past. He's still the same God!

- How does the cross of Jesus add to the beauty of God's past mercy?

Use that reflection to guide a time of confession and repentance.

Wednesday 25th November

When God's people sin, God remains faithful. He doesn't change, and his grace and mercy remain the same today as they have always done. This can give us confidence even as we humble ourselves in confession.

Read Nehemiah 9v16-21

- What are the main contrasts between God and his people?

Read Nehemiah 9v32-37

- What features of God's character do the people focus on in their prayers?
- What are the people asking God to do?

Apply

The contrast between God's beautiful grace and our ugly sin is most clearly seen at the cross.

- How does the cross of Jesus show more of the ugliness of our sin in contrast with the beauty of God's mercy?
- Once again, spend some time reflecting on God's past mercy and grace, and use that to fuel prayers of confession and then praise.

Thursday 26th November

The Ezra-Nehemiah plan has involved 2 major rebuilding works: the temple and the city. But the real plan has been the restoration of the people as God's covenant people. Today that reaches its climax!

Read Nehemiah 10v28-31

- What do the people promise to do here?
- How would these promises maintain their unique identity as God's people?

Read Nehemiah 10v32-39

- What do the people promise here?
- How would these promises maintain the central place of their worship as God's people?

Apply

Just as it was true for God's people then, so also today God calls us to holiness as we worship him alone.

- What commitments do you need to make to separate yourself from worldly practices and behaviours?
- How can you commit yourself to make worship central in your life? Are there any specific ways you could recommit to serving your church family?

Friday 27th November

'Project:Restoration' has come so far. There's still one snag: there aren't many people in the city itself! Decisive action is needed...

Read Nehemiah 11v1-6

- How does Nehemiah highlight the importance of Jerusalem as he describes it?
- Why is Jerusalem so important in this way?

Read Nehemiah 11v25-36

The territories mentioned here include the territory of Judah, and go further, stretching towards the land as it was before the exile.

- Reflect on **Genesis 12v6-7**. How do these verses in Nehemiah, hundreds of years later, recall God's promises and emphasise his faithfulness?

Apply

'Project:Restoration' continues today as God's people are called to him through Jesus. It can still look unimpressive and feel very small, just as it did then.

Reflect back on God's promises through history and look forward to God's promises for the future of his people.

- What does it mean to take confidence in these?
- What would it look like for you to *commend* those who make sacrifices to serve God? (11v2)

Saturday 28th November

The final climax of Ezra-Nehemiah comes as the people come together to praise God for his restoration work. God's people are praising him in God's place!

Read Nehemiah 12v27-30

- How does Nehemiah emphasise the size and strength of this praise party?

Read Nehemiah 12v40-43

- How does Nehemiah emphasise the people's joy?

Apply

- How can you creatively and memorably rejoice at God's great work for his people?
- Spend some time in prayerful praise. (Perhaps you could listen to and sing along to a worship song of rejoicing.)

Sunday 29th November

After all the rejoicing yesterday, it feels like Ezra-Nehemiah could end at 12v43. But there are more details to come. The story of God's 'Project:Restoration' is not done yet!

Read Nehemiah 12v44-47

- Notice the detailed administration Nehemiah outlines for ongoing temple service. Why do you think he feels these are important to include?
- What does this tell us about *ongoing life and worship* in the rebuilt Jerusalem?

God's 'Project:Restoration' does not lead to a moment, but a reality.

The new Jerusalem fulfils that reality perfectly.

Read Revelation 21v1-5

- How will 'living in Jerusalem' be fulfilled in the New Creation?
- How will 'Project:Restoration' be finished?

Apply

- What difference does it make that we live for a future reality not a future moment?
- How can you live in anticipation of serving God in worship in the new Jerusalem?

Monday 30th November

After the high point of chapter 12, Ezra-Nehemiah finishes not with a bang but a whimper. It is a book which has always been looking forward, beyond itself.

Read Nehemiah 13v10-11, 15-17 and 23-25

- What sins and folly have Israel committed?
- Compare the promises made in chapter 10v28-39 (November 26th): Can you see each promise being undone by the people?

The restoration and reform which has been so promising has failed to have any lasting effect. The people are still failing and unfaithful. Old Testament history ends on this anti-climax.

Read Mark 1v14-15

- How does Jesus bring the good news Nehemiah leaves us longing for?

Apply

- How does the end of Ezra-Nehemiah leave you thirsting for the coming Messiah?
- Spend some time reflecting on all you have seen in Ezra-Nehemiah this past month. How has God's project of restoration both challenged you and filled you with hope?