

# Knowing the Bible: Ezra and Nehemiah

## Week 4: Rebuilding Again and Resolution (Ezra 5-6)

---

### The Place of the Passage

Chapter 4 ended with the temple rebuilding stopped, and for a time the adversaries seemed to have won. Chapters 5–6 show God’s sovereign hand in the resumption and completion of the work—culminating in a joyful dedication of the rebuilt temple and the celebration of ceremonial practices there. These passages complete the book’s first half, resolving the story of the first group of returned exiles under Zerubbabel.

### The Big Picture

These chapters make clear that God is overseeing the reestablishment of this remnant according to his word and for his redemptive purposes. The centrality of the temple emphasizes his merciful provision of a way for his chosen people to come into his presence and worship him.

### Reflection and Discussion

Read [Ezra 5–6](#). Then write your reflections on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 810–814; available online at [esv.org](#).)

#### **God’s Word, God’s Leaders, and God’s Eye (5:1–5)**

How beautiful to see what God did to urge his people back to the task of rebuilding!

Read [Ezra 5:1–2](#), and for background read [Haggai 1](#) and [Zechariah 1:1–17; 4:1–10](#). What can we learn here about God and his ways?

Consider the three-pronged leadership God provides his people at this time: prophets, a priest in the line of Aaron, and a ruler (Zerubbabel) in the line of King David. (On Zerubbabel, see the ESV Study Bible note on [Hag. 1:1](#).) In what ways do these leaders together picture the one perfect leader still to come?

Read [Ezra 5:1–5](#) and [Psalm 33:13–19](#). Comment on the perspective given by these verses—and the importance of this perspective for God’s people both then and now.

#### **Working It Out with King Darius (5:6–6:12)**

First, we have a copy of the letter sent by local officials to Darius, asking whether this rebuilding project had been sanctioned by King Cyrus. Read this letter ([Ezra 5:6–17](#)) and jot down words and phrases that stand out. Notice especially the words used to name God and his people. (Note: “Sheshbazzar” is perhaps another name for Zerubbabel or the name of an earlier governor.)

The letter inspires King Darius to search for records of Cyrus's decree (recall 1:1–4). Read the results (6:1–12) and list the requirements of Darius's decree. What strikes you? What was King Darius evidently seeking? And what was God clearly doing for his people?

Darius refers to the “God who has caused his name to dwell there”—this “house of God that is in Jerusalem” (v. 12). In what ways does Darius get God's purposes exactly right? See [Deuteronomy 12:1–11](#) and 1 Kings 8:27–30.

### **Resolution and Celebration (6:13–22)**

What layers of authority work to bring about the resolution reported in [Ezra 6:13–15](#)? What is the effect of these summary verses?

Compare [Ezra 6:16–18](#) with 1 Kings 8:62–66 to find ways in which the dedication of the rebuilt temple recalls the dedication of the first one under King Solomon. What do the various parts of this ceremony in [Ezra 6:16–18](#) in effect declare before God?

Finally, they celebrate the Feast of Passover (vv. 19–22). What do you notice about those who participate? What did the Passover commemorate, and how is this especially meaningful at this time (see [Ex. 12:1–20](#))?

In what ways does the final verse of this section ([Ezra 6:22](#)) bring an appropriate conclusion and focus? (Recall the initial focus in 1:1.)

Read through the following sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

## **Gospel Glimpses**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SIN.** God's people are clearly aware that this destruction and exile came about because of their own sin. God has been merciful to redeem them. They tell their history honestly: “Because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon” ([Ezra 5:11–12](#)). Chapter 6 carefully points out the “sin offering” on behalf of “all Israel”—with no exceptions. The sin is pervasive. This is a people whom God did not choose for their righteousness, but he set his steadfast love on them and provided for them the means to deal with their sin—namely, the sacrificial system they are working obediently to reinstitute. Ultimately he provided full and final purification from sin through their seed—Jesus, who knew no sin but was made sin for us, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

**PASSOVER.** The celebration of Passover concludes this section, recalling God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt, and the Passover lamb without blemish, whose blood on the doorpost and lintel of a house delivered those inside from death. As these returned exiles “slaughtered the Passover lamb” ([Ezra 6:20](#)), they praised the God who rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and now from exile in Babylon. They praised the God who delivers his people—ultimately from sin and death through Christ's blood shed for us on the cross. The far-reaching scope of this deliverance is hinted at in this scene, as the Passover meal is eaten by the returned exiles and “also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel” (6:21). The joy permeating this scene is the joy of salvation that will spread through this people to all the nations of the earth.

## **Whole-Bible Connections**

**PROPHETS.** The appearance of Haggai and Zechariah offers a wonderful whole-Bible connector, as we link this story with the prophets who brought God’s word to the characters in the story. The prophetic books come alive in our understanding when we set them in their historical contexts—some (like Isaiah) bring God’s word in advance of the exile; some (like Jeremiah) speak directly into the exile; and a few (like Haggai and Zechariah) prophesy to the returned remnant. God sends his word into every part of the history of his people. Just as the “prophets of God were with them, supporting them” ([Ezra 5:2](#)), so God in every age provides his people with his living and active Word, now given us in the completed inspired Scriptures. How instructive to see God overseeing this remnant both by stirring the hearts of kings from afar and by bringing his word right to his people, a needed “support.” The greatest support would ultimately come through the Word made flesh—Jesus the Messiah, who is God with us fully and finally.

**CALENDARS AND PROPHECIES.** In Old Testament narratives the Jewish calendar is consistently in view, with the various feast days marking seasons and events. We read that the temple rebuilding was “finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king” ([Ezra 6:15](#)). Not only does such specificity root these stories in history, it also provides context for ceremonial practices. Adar (our February/March) was the last month of the Jewish year, and the next month (the “first month”; v. 19) brings the celebration of Passover. In God’s providence the people complete and dedicate the temple just in time to begin the whole cycle of feast days, starting with the crucial Passover celebration. These carefully recorded dates also reveal that about 70 years have passed between the destruction of the first temple (586 BC) and Darius’s sixth year (515 BC). This period of time offers one way to understand the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of a 70-year exile ([Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10](#)).

## Theological Soundings

**GOD’S SOVEREIGN SHAPING OF HISTORY.** This section emphasizes God’s sovereign shaping of events; it is an account of God at work on behalf of his people. He sends the prophets with his strengthening word ([Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14](#)). “The eye of their God” protects the Jewish elders (5:5). The rebuilding happens by his decree (6:14), and the actions of earthly kings occur as he determines them (6:22). It is he who makes his people joyful (6:22)! Along with the local focus on the temple comes a larger focus on God’s sovereign hand over all nations and all of history. As the apostle Paul preached, “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. . . . He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:24-26).

**GOD’S NAME.** King Darius might not understand, but he rightly says that God “caused his name to dwell” in his “house” ([Ezra 6:12](#)). Names in the Scriptures often represent a person’s essence—hence name changes such as Abram to Abraham or Jacob to Israel. By designating the temple as the place where he would “put his name and make his habitation” ([Deut. 12:5](#)), God was deigning to reveal his glorious self to his people in that place—even though that place could not hold his transcendent being. The wonder of the Bible’s story is the wonder of God’s revealing his name to us—as he did to Moses with the words “I am who I am” ([Ex. 3:14](#)). But the greatest wonder is the revelation of himself in his Son, who has been given the “name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow”—not just in a temple but “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:9-11).

## **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of [Ezra 5–6](#) for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

## **As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study. And take a moment also to look back through this unit, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.