

The Hand of Our God Is Good - Week 1

Ezra 1-6

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Ezra-Nehemiah

Author: Likely Chronicler who wrote 1,2 Chronicles

Time: Written after the conclusion of Nehemiah's ministry around 400BC

Significance: Ezra & Nehemiah share the story of the temple being rebuilt, the stabilizing of Jerusalem, and the Jewish community that developed — all of which played key roles in the life and ministry of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, and while the rebuilt temple may have paled in comparison to the temple Solomon built, it would serve the Jews for more than 400 years until Jesus would remove the need for a physical temple in Jerusalem.¹

If you are new to following Jesus – or maybe don't understand how the Bible fits together – it really does tell one long story of God's faithfulness throughout all of history. The Bible begins with creation, and shares the story of humanity, where sin and evil begins, and how God still works in the lives of people for His glory. The first years of humanity prove to be broken, but God has a plan.

¹⁷ When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God
(Ge 17:1-8)

Through the story of Abraham's family, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, and Jacob's sons we see God's goodness and faithfulness despite broken human behaviors. We pick up the story in Genesis 35...

¹⁰ And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. ¹¹ And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be

¹ 633, Holy Land Illustrated Bible, CSB

fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you. (Ge 35:10–12)

These 12 sons of Israel would betray their brother Joseph, but God had a plan and purpose and worked through their bad choices. In Genesis 50...

¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus Joseph comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

(Ge 50:18–21)

The story continues in Exodus, God fulfills His promise to Abraham, his descendants do grow into a great nation, God delivers them from slavery in Egypt, leads them to the Promised Land, makes a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, God gives them the law and ten commandments that distinguishes them, and governing their lives and how they worship, and leads them to build a tabernacle where His presence would be with them. Moses warns the people of Israel that their disobedience to God would have great consequences. God allows Moses to see the Promised Land, but it would be Joshua who would lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land.

As the story continues, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings tell the story of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings – and you will see seasons of obedience and disobedience, repentance and idolatry – the cycle of broken people and a faithful God plays out over and over. We see in the lives of David, and of Solomon who would build the temple in Jerusalem – this cycle of obedience and disobedience, but all the time God's unchanging goodness and purpose would remain. His purpose would prevail. The Hand of our God is Good.

Ezra and Nehemiah tell the history of the Jewish people after Israel's almost thousand year presence in the land of Canaan. Ezra captures the story of a second exodus for God's people after 70 years of exile in Persia. Jerusalem had long served as the political capital and center of Jewish religion dating back to the time of King David. For more than 15 years, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon had threatened Jerusalem. More than 10,000 Israelites were in exile, and that list included the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel. In 587, Israel's king Zedekiah fled from Jerusalem along with his two sons, but they were captured, his sons were executed, and they removed the king's eyes. The end of King Zedekiah was the end of Israel's monarchy. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed what was left of Jerusalem.²

²Derek Thomas, Ezra & Nehemiah, 4

During the period of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, the Assyrians goal was to destroy the Northern Kingdom, and by way of mixed marriage to breed the Jewish people out of existence. This is ultimately where the Samaritans come from. (and deep hatred we see between Jews and Samaritans during Jesus' ministry). For those Jewish people in Babylon, there was societal pressure to forget their own Jewish culture and way of life and to convert to their "superior culture". But as the Persian empire grew, there was greater tolerance for belief in different gods. ³

The book of Ezra begins in 538BC, about 49 years after Jerusalem fell — the story picks up in the middle of the Persian Empire (modern day Iran). The King of Persia was named Cyrus – and God would use King Cyrus even though King Cyrus did not worship him. Here's something fascinating: 150 years before Cyrus, the prophet Isaiah spoke this word of the Lord. This is Isa 44

The Lord Redeems Israel

²¹ Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.²² I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you. ²³ Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel. ²⁴ Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: "I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, ²⁵ who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, ²⁶ who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins'; ²⁷ who says to the deep, 'Be dry; I will dry up your rivers'; ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.' "

Cyrus, God's Instrument

⁴⁵ Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations (this describes the Persian empire) before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: ² "I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, ⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/help-me-teach-the-bible/aaron-messner-teaching-ezra/>

things. ⁸ “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the Lord have created it. ⁹ “Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’ ¹⁰ Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ or to a woman, ‘With what are you in labor?’ ” ¹¹ Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him: “Ask me of things to come; will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? ¹² I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. ¹³ I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the Lord of hosts.
(Is 44:21–45:13)

¹⁰ “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”
(Je 29:10–14)

The Proclamation of Cyrus

²² Now 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 and also put it in writing: ²³ “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.’ ”
(2 Ch 36:22–23)

Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ends – The Persian Empire had defeated Babylon in 539BC and in 538BC, Persian King Cyrus releases those in exile back to Jerusalem. The Jewish people were led by Zerubbabel. Upon return to Judea, these Jewish exiles would experience opposition by non-Jewish inhabitants. The Lord would use the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the rebuilding of the temple and its construction was completed in 515. It took 23 years to rebuild. Look at what God does –

The Proclamation of Cyrus

1 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 and also put it in writing:

² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

⁵ Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. ⁶ And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. ⁷ Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

(EZR 1:1–7)

God stirs the heart of a man – who does not know Him – and calls Him “The Lord - the God of heaven” and “He has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem” If you are His people - may God be with you. God – and rebuild the house of the Lord. This stirring of God in Cyrus’ heart was also God delivering the Israelites out of the captivity that their sin and disobedience caused them.

The Exiles Return

2 Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.

(EZR 2:1)

⁶⁸ Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.

(EZR 2:68)

Rebuilding the Altar (Ezra 3)

3 When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings

on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴ And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, ⁵ and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord.

⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

(Ezr 3:1-7)

Rebuilding the Temple

⁸ Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. ⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

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. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

(Ezr 3:8-13)

Adversaries Oppose the Rebuilding

⁴ Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.” ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”

⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build ⁵ and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

(Ezr 4:1–5)

King Artaxerxes – sensing resistance – shuts construction down.

²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. ²² And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

²³ Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. ²⁴ Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

(Ezr 4:21–24)

Rebuilding Begins Anew

5 Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. (Ezra 5:1)

Haggai prophecies:

⁴ Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, ⁵ according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. ⁶ For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. ⁹ The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.’ ”

(Hag 2:4–9)

² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

³ At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” ⁴ They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?” ⁵ But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it. (Ezr 5:2–5)

Darius gets this letter:

⁸ Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. ⁹ Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’ ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. ¹¹ And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. ¹³ However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt.

(Ezr 5:8–13)

Darius checks the archives and learns that this indeed was a decree Cyrus the king had issued so here is his response:

⁷ Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. ⁸ Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. ⁹ And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, ¹⁰ that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. ¹¹ Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. ¹² May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.” (Ezr 6:7–12)

The work continues – and with all diligence the Temple is finished and dedicated:

¹⁴ And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; ¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. ¹⁶ And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸

And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses. ¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. ²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, 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. ²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. (Ezr 6:14–22)

The Hand of our God is good. He holds the universe. He holds all of creation. He sustains. He knows. He sees. He is committed to His people. He can use anyone. Nothing can stand in His way. No king. No country. No government. No dictator. No policy. No one and nothing can stand in His way. Nothing will prevent His purpose. Nothing compares to His power. His plans, every one, will prevail. I began to wonder what the prophet Zechariah said. He spoke a lot. Boldly clearly calling the people in Jerusalem to obedience and trust in God. Line by line. I'm reading. Word by word. Some of it is easy to read. Some not so much. Then my eyes hit 9:9. It's Jesus. The King of all Kings. The goodness of God who would offer His life on the cross, once and for all.

⁹ *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zec 9:9)*

¹⁶ *On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people;
for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. ¹⁷ For how great is his goodness, and
how great his beauty! (Zec 9:16-17a)*

The Hand of our God – the nail-scarred Hand of our God is good. Jesus is unrivaled in how good, how true, how worthy, how trustworthy, how wise, how glorious — turn to Him.

