Lesson Title: Introduction
Date: April 8, 2015

Introduction:
The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are believed to have been originally separate books but they occur as one within the oldest Hebrew manuscripts. The Jewish canon comprises twenty-four books, the five of the Pentateuch [Torah or Law] (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) eight books of the Prophets [earlier and later prophets] (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets), and eleven Hagiographa [writings] (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Chronicles). In this original canon, Ezra and Nehemiah are found together as one book [Ezra-Nehemiah] and are in the third division known as “the Writings”. Nehemiah is the last of the Old Testament historical books. Similarities between Nehemiah and Ezra:

- The return to Jerusalem to build something significant
- Opposition to the building project
- Confession of sin among the people
- The observance of a holy feast

*important words to know: Canon, Torah, Pentateuch, Hagiographa

Who wrote the book(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah?
The author of these books is anonymous. Ancient Jewish sources usually credit Ezra as the author of both. More than likely these books were written by the “Chronicler” – the person(s) responsible for 1 and 2 Chronicles. They are linked during the introduction of the book of Ezra (1:1-2 “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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.” = II Chronicles 36:22-23 “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 23 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up.”), it also shares similarities in language, terminology, themes, and perspective. Both of these books contain sections that can be called memoirs, and those sections were more than likely written by Ezra and Nehemiah.

Who are some of the people mentioned in the books?
Ezra: Ezra was a scribe [teacher of the law]. His name meant “help”.
Nehemiah: Nehemiah was a layman with administrative skills; cupbearer to the king. His name meant “the Lord is compassionate.”

*important words to know: scribe, layman, cupbearer

Just to get us back in the Old Testament mindset, we’re going to go back and refer to things we previously discussed in the Esther and Daniel studies. During our Daniel study we discussed in detail the dream of the statue from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. It was made of four metals and four main body parts. These metals and parts represented the Gentile world empires. Nebuchadnezzar was ruler of the Babylonian empire throughout the book of Daniel. The Babylonian empire was defeated by the Medo-Persians; Cyrus came in and welded the two nations together forming a Persian rule. Throughout the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah we see the Persians rule.

Cyprus [Cyrus II “the Great”]: Persian king – founder of the Persian Empire. Ruler during the time of Ezra. From actual history the Lord called Cyrus by name, 200 years before he was born! In Isaiah 45:1-4 [paraphrasing] it says: "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden to subdue nations before him....I have surnamed thee though thou hast not
Against the Odds

An In Depth Study of Nehemiah

known me." Cyrus was the king who conquered Babylon. His son Cambyses followed his rule for eight years, but then committed suicide leading to two years of fighting of rival claimants to the throne. [His rule is not mentioned in the Bible]

Darius I (Hystaspes): Was the son-in-law of Cambyses. The grandson of Cyrus by marriage. He had been the spear-bearer to Cambyses. His rule ended the unrest after the death of Cambyses. Invaded Greece. Haggai and Zechariah preached during his rule and the temple was built and dedicated.

Xerxes: Son of Darius I. Also seen in the Bible as Ahasuerus in the book of Esther. Esther married this king. He was killed when the palace was overthrown.

Artaxerxes: The step-son of Esther. Ruler during the time of Nehemiah. Faced revolt in Egypt and made peace with the Greeks. He died of natural causes.

People of Samaria: Enemies during the time of Ezra. They were trying to sabotage the rebuilding of the temple.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem: Enemies during the time of Nehemiah. The Horonites and Ammonites were two of the people groups God had driven from the Promised Land for the Israelites. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were regional governors serving under the king of Persia. Sanballat, called a Horonite, was probably from Horonaim, a city of Moab. Tobiah the Ammonite was governing an area east of the Jordan River. Geshem the Arab was most likely from the region south of Judah. Generations after Israel had first possessed the Promised Land, some of their old enemies were back, seeking to keep Jerusalem in ruins.

*need to know: rulers during Ezra and Nehemiah. Babylonian returns to Jerusalem and their purpose for returning.

What were the books written about?

Ezra: Through the prophets, God had ordained that His chosen people would return to the land of Israel after a seventy-year exile. (Jeremiah 25:11 “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”; Jeremiah 29:10 “For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”)

The book of Ezra provides a link in the historical record of the Israelite people. When king Zedekiah was dethroned and captured and the people exiled to Babylon, Judah as an independent nation ceased to exist. The book of Ezra provides an account of the Jews’ regathering, of their struggle to survive and to rebuild what had been destroyed. Ezra’s account proclaims that God kept His word, and it shows that when God’s people remained faithful to Him, He would continue to bless them. Hence, the book emphasizes the temple and proper worship, similar to Chronicles (which was also written during these days).

Ezra gives the account of the first and second returning trips of Babylonian captives back to Jerusalem. The first group was led back by Zerubbabel. There were 42,360 people in this group [Ezra 2:64 “The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore.”] Ezra was among the people in this group. Their purpose was to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by king Nebuchadnezzar. The second group was led back by Ezra (Ezra 8). There were around 2,000 that came back during this trip. Nehemiah led the third group back to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:12 “And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.”).

In the book of Ezra we witness the rebuilding of the new temple, the unification of the returning tribes as they shared common struggles and were challenged to work together. Later, after the original remnant had stopped work on the city walls and spiritual apathy ruled, Ezra arrived with another two thousand people and sparked a spiritual revival. By the end of the book, Israel had renewed its covenant with God and had begun acting in obedience to Him.

Nehemiah: Nehemiah recorded the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem, Judah’s capital city. Together, he and Ezra, who led the spiritual revival of the people, directed the political and religious restoration of the Jews in their homeland after the Babylonian captivity.

Nehemiah was a layman, not a priest like Ezra nor a prophet like Malachi. He served the Persian king in a secular position before leading a group of Jews to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city walls. “Nehemiah’s expertise in the king’s court equipped him adequately for the political and physical reconstruction necessary for the remnant to survive.” Under Nehemiah’s leadership, the Jews withstood opposition and came together to accomplish their goal. Nehemiah led by example, giving up a
respected position in a palace for hard labor in a politically insignificant district. He partnered with Ezra, who also appears in this book, to solidify the political and spiritual foundations of the people. Nehemiah’s humility before God (see his moving intercessory prayers in chapters 1 and 9) provided an example for the people. He did not claim glory for himself but always gave God the credit for his successes.

**Where were the books written? (setting)**

**Ezra:** The events in Ezra are set in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The returning exiles were able to populate only a tiny portion of their former homeland.

**Nehemiah:** The book of Nehemiah opens in the Persian city of Susa. Later that year, Nehemiah traveled to Israel, leading the third of three returns by the Jewish people following their seventy years of exile in Babylon. Most of the book centers on events in Jerusalem.

**When were the books written?**

**Ezra:** The book of Ezra records two separate time periods directly following the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Ezra 1–6 covers the first return of Jews from captivity, led by Zerubbabel—a period of twenty-three years beginning with the edict of Cyrus of Persia and ending at the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (538–515 BC). Ezra 7–10 picks up the story more than sixty years later, when Ezra led the second group of exiles to Israel (458 BC). The book could not have been completed earlier than about 450 BC (the date of the events recorded in 10:17–44).

**Nehemiah:** Begins in the year 444 BC. The narrative concludes around the year 430 BC, and scholars believe the book was written shortly thereafter. Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament. Although the book of Esther appears after Nehemiah in the canon, the events in Esther occurred in the time period between Ezra 6 and 7, between the first and second returns of the people to Israel. The prophet Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah.

**Why were the books written?**

**Ezra:** God moved the hearts of secular rulers (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes) to allow, even encourage and help, the Jewish people to return home. He used these unlikely allies to fulfill His promises of restoration for His chosen people. Have you encountered unlikely sources of blessing? Have you wondered how God can really work all things together for the good of those who are called by His name (Romans 8:28)? Take time today to acknowledge God’s sovereignty and mercy in your life. Recommit to Him your trust, your love, and your obedience.

**Nehemiah:** The book of Nehemiah shows us the kind of significant impact one individual can have on a nation. Nehemiah served in secular offices, using his position to bring back to the Jews order, stability, and proper focus on God. He exercised his administrative skills in his strategy to use half the people for building while the other half kept watch for the Samaritans who, under Sanballat, threatened attack (Nehemiah 4–7). As governor, Nehemiah negotiated peace among the Jews who were unhappy with Persian taxes. He exhibited a steadfast determination to complete his goals. Accomplishing those goals resulted in a people encouraged, renewed, and excited about their future. God uses all manner of people in all manner of places doing all manner of work. Do you feel you must be “in ministry” in order to serve God? Be encouraged; He is not limited by your vocation. In fact, God has placed you where you are for a purpose. Have this attitude about your work: “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” (Colossians 3:17).