

# God Restores, Redeems and Rebuilds His People:

## A Study of Ezra and Nehemiah

A Bible Study in 11 Weeks  
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Individuals and independent small groups are welcome to use this study as a guide as you dig into the Word alone or with others. Any group meeting as part of a church, ministry or non-profit, please contact me before using this curriculum. Any sales or reproduction of this work is prohibited. Dr. Kellett has written over a dozen Bible studies, available upon request. Contact me with questions.

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## **Old Testament Overview and Background**

In the late 600s BCE—the setting just before the lifetimes of Ezra and Nehemiah—God’s people were living for themselves, and had a long history of doing so. When God created humankind, they decided to follow their own path and were sent from the Garden, and from intimacy with God. Then He made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, telling them to “Go to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12), and trust this covenant I make with you. God vowed: “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” (Genesis 17). The people of God had hard and stubborn hearts, but He continued to patiently love them and call them back to Himself, eventually empowering Moses to bring them out of slavery, while Joshua led them, as one people, into the Promised Land of Canaan in 1450 BCE.

God then lovingly provided a series of Judges to help His children organize themselves (1300-1000 BCE), but, ever-needy and distracted by the world around them, the people of God asked for a King. God responded, providing prophets to help guide the Kings and God’s people, to help train their hearts on Him. Through Eli, Samuel, Saul, Nathan, David and Solomon, we see God’s people lifted up as a Kingdom is established. Finally, as God appointed leaders who have hearts for Him, David founded and built Jerusalem, the City of David, while Solomon is charged with building the Temple of the Lord there around 900 BCE.

Despite the power of this Kingdom, established in God’s name, and full of God’s people, distraction struck again. In 930 BCE, the people of God split into 2 Kingdoms. Through Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Josiah, along with many other kings and prophets, God’s people battled one another and their own tendencies to worship idols. In the meantime, the Assyrians (880-612 BCE) and Babylonians (615-539 BCE) came into power, and eventually God allowed His people, hell-bent on making their own way in the world, to be attacked. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, stealing all the treasures from the palace and temple, destroying the city and the temple it held. Not only this, but, determined to destroy the remnants of a culture of devotion among the Hebrews, Nebuchadnezzar exiled all craftsmen, artisans, nobles, and fighting men to Babylon (586 BCE; 2 Kings 24 and 2 Chronicles 36), leaving no one behind to lead God’s people. However, God promised His people that He would gather them and return them to their land after 70 years of exile. He provided His people with leaders like Daniel and, later, Esther, to shared wisdom and leadership in devotion to any Hebrew who remembered the God who called them His own. God established a loving respect between the leaders of Babylon and certain Jews, laying the groundwork for the restoration, redemption and rebuilding of God’s people, their temple and their city.

In 539 BCE Cyrus the Great, of Persia, defeated the Babylonians, taking over Israel and Judah, and interacting with the Jews still exiled in Babylon. In 538 BCE, Cyrus allowed the Jews of Judah to return to Jerusalem with a group of Hebrew families to rebuild the temple. Ezra, a priest, arrives to lead the project 70 years later in 458

BCE. 13 years after that, Nehemiah returns to rebuild the wall as well, and Jerusalem is restored, all with the blessing and backing of the Persian Empire.

### **Themes to Explore**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are stories of a God who rebuilds, restores and redeems. God returns His people to fulfill His promise to set them apart and to be their God. Ezra leads as a priest and teacher, while Nehemiah governs and leads. These 2 books contain 2 primary actions in 13 years: to rebuild the temple and wall of Jerusalem, and to teach returning exiles to renew their commitment to God. There are people in the Remnant, the Jews who stayed behind during the exile. On the other hand, there are Returners, who want to follow God in this all-consuming purpose, and yet their identity is confused because 2 generations have passed in which they have not experienced the setting apart of God.

### **As you read think about:**

How is your relationship with God connected to how you love and treat the people around you (if they are or are not believers)?

What does it mean to lead as God's leader?

How can you help people renew their commitment to God?

What does it mean to follow God in a cultural moment that complicates any effort to know Him or His people (especially if you don't remember how much He has provided for you)?

How do you get distracted and what are the consequences on you and others?

How can you stay faithful to a vision no matter how hard the path ahead (or absent the fruit)?

How does God want to restore you, redeem your family and rebuild your community?

## Week One

### Day 1: Ezra 1:1-4

- How do you see God's faithfulness here? Can God be faithful even when things are terrible (all the Jews have been exiled for 70 years at this point! 2 generations of being refugees)?

### Day 2: Ezra 1:1-2:70

- Good endeavors can come and go, but this mission is for people whose hearts God had stirred (v5). Are you asking God for your mission, or sticking with inertia? Do you long for a mission or does that idea intimidate you?
- Are you empowering others' missions (hopes, dreams), or do you find yourself judging them? Think about the people around you who could be encouraged if you leaned in, listened, got involved? Who can you start praying for?

### Day 3: Ezra 1:1-2:1

- People who talk to God empower others and are not threatened. Even Cyrus was moved to empower others under him. Who threatens you? Can you actively compliment and embrace the dreams of people you don't like? (What?!!) Do you feel any conviction here?

- People who talk to God are generous, and generosity inspires generosity. Others gave because the King gave. Where are you generous and where can you be more so?
- People who talk to God reform wrongs and seek justice. Cyrus returned the gifts God gave to Solomon that the Babylonians stole. Where can God use you to help right a wrong, even if you are not guilty of committing it? Is God creating a different vision of community here where we actively carry the burdens of others?

#### Day 4: Nehemiah 1:1-11

- 13 years after Ezra got to Jerusalem, Nehemiah is moved. The temple has been rebuilt. Why does Nehemiah weep?
- Do you know what God really cares about in your city/life? Are you weeping for it? What can you do about it?

#### Day 5: Nehemiah 1:1-11

- Nehemiah responds to God with prayer and confession, but not action. How would you model Him?
- Begin with going to God, then confessing corporately and personally, trusting Him with ALL the obstacles, and then invite Him into the details of your dream.

## Week 2

### Day 1: Ezra 3:1-13

- 70 years after the people are taken to Babylon, they are return to Jerusalem “as one man” (v1). What would make us, as the “church”, gather “as one man?” Ummmmmmm, is it mainly the things we are against (if so.....ouch!)? Reflect on that here:

### Day 2: Ezra 3:1-13

- *How* did they gather? What did they do in order to (and as they) gather(ed)?
- Sometimes following God looks like tragedy, weeping, and praising with others. How can this encourage you if you are walking through a hard time?

### Day 3: Ezra 4:1-24

- Why were the “people of the land” (4), who had lived there forever, upset? Why did they write the King? (Does that tick you off?)
- How are you like the “people of the land?” Have you ever been a part of friends/work/church where you feel frustrated when things change? Perhaps you don’t want programs/people to succeed if you aren’t involved or weren’t consulted? Does your speech, like their speech, encourage fear in others? Take on honest look at your habits and reflect on them here.

Day 4: Nehemiah 2:1-8

- God did a miracle here, and used Nehemiah's good planning/relationships to make it possible. What had Nehemiah done with his life so that he was ready when God moved?

- How often do we just want to whine when things are hard or don't seem to be improving? What can you learn here from Nehemiah?

Day 5: Nehemiah 2:9-20

- Even though Nehemiah had his vision, he kept quiet and prepared himself, working at night and alone. What can you learn from him about being faithful in the small things, being patient even with big dreams?

- Think about other people in Scripture who are following God AND who have to bide their time? Write down a few examples. Is there a bigger truth for you here about the way God accomplishes His purposes in you?

## Week Three

### Day 1: Nehemiah 3:1-32

- As you read, think about calling. Nehemiah tells them to build from the sheep gate in a counter-clockwise way. Some will build, and others will repair; each will have their own calling. Have you felt God call you into something in the past? Was the calling about you or about the Kingdom of God?
- With Eliashib, the high priest, his calling seems to be about family (his grandfather Jeshua was also a priest). For the sons of Hassenaah, God's calling for their job was also about family (are you called to anything with your family? Hard stuff sometimes!). For Jedaiah, His calling seems to be about his location. Allow these examples to expand the way you think about calling, keeping in mind that in the body of Christ we all serve differently but crucially. Reflect here on anything that strikes you.
- Where are you now, and do you sense any calling, big or small?

### Day 2: Nehemiah 3:1-32

- We can sometimes look to be gratified in our calling. Challenge yourself here to look beyond yourself and look at your community. Ask yourself these questions:
  - Can you see your calling as a benefit to you or to others?
  - Can you see your role as part of a bigger whole?
  - Can you seek a "Nehemiah" to help you see how you fit or how to improve?
  - Who are you serving with? Is it really "with"?



Day 3: Ezra 5:1-5

- The work on the temple stopped because jealous people convinced the king they were a threat, so he made them stop. Then they kept “stopping” for 15 years! When you get a closed door or enter a rough season, does your original calling change? What do you cling to in hard places?

Day 4: Ezra 5:1-5

- The people return because Haggai and Zechariah prophesy to them that they have lost sight of God’s top calling on them: to rebuild the temple! Who are the prophetic voices in your life? How have those people spoken into your life? Ask them to speak, and cling to those words of life.

Day 5: Ezra 5:6-17

- Tattenai was a new governor who was unsure about what was happening so he wanted to send a report to King Darius. When he asked them for their names, they didn’t get defensive, but told them their story. They knew who they were, and what they were called to, and that God was helping them, even through Tattenai! How can this episode impact your life?

- Knowing that even the skeptical people in your life can admire and respect the work you do, think about the way you handle questions about your actions, intentions and calling. How often do you get defensive if anyone challenges you?

## Week Four

### Day 1: Ezra 6:1-12

- How does Tattenai respond? Reflect on your life. Do you tend to respond off the cuff, or do you search God's "documents" (v1) (aka scripture...or your own history) to see what He has done in the past when you face challenges (He often cares about the minutiae!)?
- Because the Jews decided to "seek the welfare of the city" of Babylon during their exile (Jeremiah 29:7), Nebuchadnezzar, and now Darius, decide to support their efforts. When we are good neighbors, God brings other people in to help His kingdom flourish. How have they rubbed off on this pagan leader (Ezra 6:12), and how can this inspire you in your city?

### Day 2: Ezra 6:13-22

- How do they celebrate finishing the temple? When is the last time you stopped and took time for joy?
- Do you have any meaningful "ceremonies-of-sorts" that help you remember your own story? These moments of remembrance give you perspective, produce gratitude in you, and show you that God has been present in you. Stop now and ask God to help you remember a part of your story.

Day 3: Nehemiah 4:1-6

- The builders of the wall are being mocked and distracted. These taunts consist of calling them selfish, mocking their effort, telling them it is farfetched and telling them what they are doing won't last. Who has a voice in your life, and what do those voices say?
- How does Nehemiah respond? What does that teach you about your own responses to negativity?

Day 4: Nehemiah 4:7-14

- How do the people respond to the taunts and threats? They decided to go to God, not to confront the negative voices. Are you content in your life to stay faithful to the task God has given you, or do you get stuck confronting people around you instead?
- Even the Jews around them used the voice of reason to doubt their calling. Have you been in a situation where people around you are not supportive "for your own good?" How has God led you through that? On the other hand, when you have friends in hard places, do you tend to tell them to give up or do you help them stay faithful to the task God has given them?

Day 5: Nehemiah 4:15-23

- What steps did the people take to continue their work? Are their actions consistent with your vision of trusting God to defend them?
- Do you pray for your own protection and the protection of others? How can you tangibly protect the people in your life (even from mockers and gossip)?

## Week Five

### Day 1: Nehemiah 5:1-13

- Nehemiah has to balance many perspectives here. What have the people done and why are they feeling abused?
- The people raise a “great outcry” (v1). Is there anything in your life worth speaking up about? Could you raise a great outcry to bring about justice for someone else?

### Day 2: Nehemiah 5:6-13

- How does Nehemiah respond? List the steps he takes as he listens, observes, gets angry, and challenged the status quo. How does this inspire you?

### Day 3: Nehemiah 5:14-19

- Where does Nehemiah get his standard of right and wrong? Why does he challenge a status quo that helps him (v15, 19)?
- Because he orients himself toward God alone, and because he maintains a perspective that keeps him grateful for what God has given Him, he does not spend energy making sure he gets what he is entitled to. Think about the ways that he has integrity, and pray God would expose your own hypocrisy. Do you demand safety and security and wealth for your family but do nothing to help ensure it for others?

Day 4: Ezra 7:1-10

- The temple is completed, rituals have been reinstated, and now Ezra asks to go (this is 57 years later). Ezra was not content to simply build (or complete) something; he knew God wanted him to tie this into the Kingdom of God. How do you intentionally link your everyday work with God's work?

Day 5: Ezra 7:11-28

- Artaxerxes understood what God was doing, and he would not have done so without Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and others. God can advance His kingdom through you when you are open about your faith! How often do you discount people because they are not believers?
- Pray God would allow you to see His Big Picture: What you do is DEEPLY related to God's work, so you are called to be excellent and to thrive exactly where you are! How does that encourage you?

## Week Six

### Day 1: Nehemiah 6:1-14

- Nehemiah is wise and understands his purpose is NOT to make sure everyone likes him, but to finish what God asked him to do. Do you struggle to stay focused and purposeful in a long-term job? Perhaps you find comfort in stability so it is easy for you to maintain renewed commitment to the same task? How does this challenge or encourage your commitment to what you do all day?

### Day 2: Nehemiah 6:1-14

- Despite Nehemiah's recent lesson that God calls us to take care of each other, they attack his character! Sometimes you do the right thing and things get worse! How do the people try to manipulate him, and how does Nehemiah respond?

### Day 3: Nehemiah 6:15-7:4

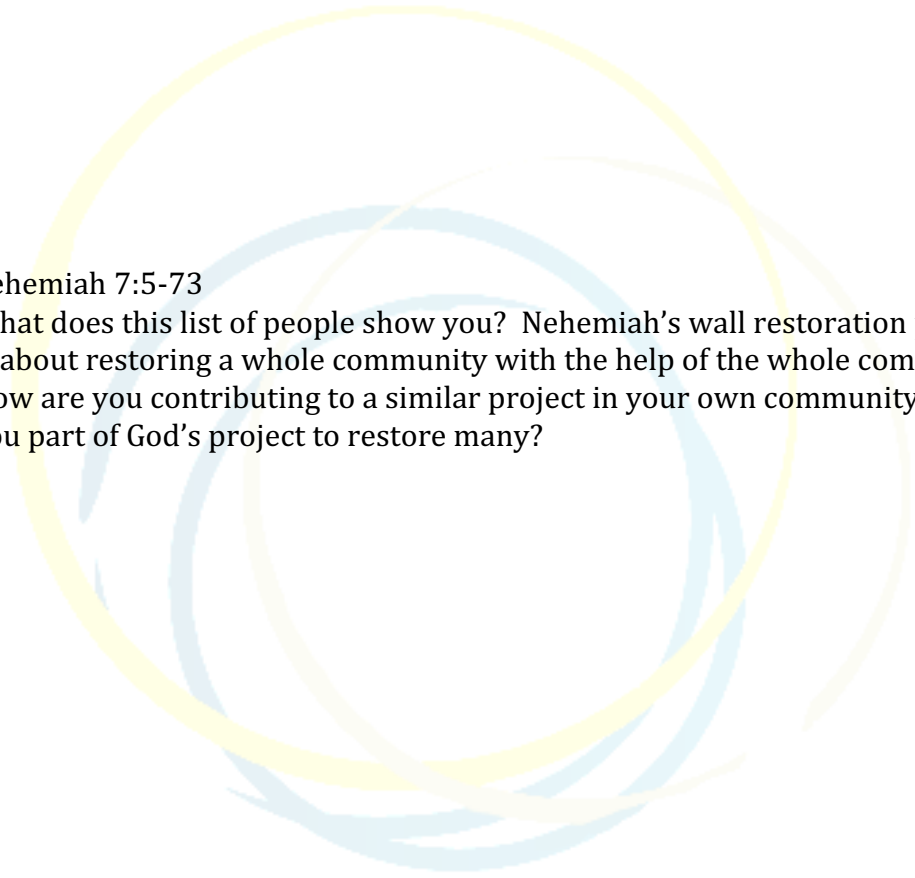
- Even here, when the wall is completed, the trouble for Nehemiah continues! He cannot measure his worth and security by finishing or accomplishing a task. What can you learn about how to follow God here? How do you find balance in being productive for God and in simply practicing His presence?

Day 4: Nehemiah 6:15-7:4

- How does Nehemiah continue to delegate and lead here? He should be celebrating, and instead he is defending himself. Nevertheless, even when he can't let his guard down, God restores him in the midst of the craziness. Find this Big Picture truth here: There is no formula for jobs, friends, enemies, living with others...the only way to walk with the Lord is simply to walk with the Lord. Does this truth overwhelm you or encourage you?

Day 5: Nehemiah 7:5-73

- What does this list of people show you? Nehemiah's wall restoration project is about restoring a whole community with the help of the whole community. How are you contributing to a similar project in your own community? Are you part of God's project to restore many?



## Week Seven

### Day 1: Ezra 8:1-20

- Do genealogies matter to God? Think about your family. Where is God calling you to “return” with your family, and where do you need to “depart”? In other words, where do you want to embrace your family patterns, and where does following God tell you to change familial habits?

### Day 2: Ezra 8:1-23

- Ezra was a stud, a priest, God’s man, and yet he went to the place where servants were trained to ask for help. He released control. Where do you need help, and where can you go to ask for it? Do you think others are blessed when you allow them to help you?
- How do you reconcile v21-23 with the earlier passage? Why was he “ashamed to ask for help” from the king (v22)?

### Day 3: Ezra 8:24-36

- God’s people and wealth, set aside for this purpose, return after a long exile. How do you see God at work to accomplish this massive undertaking?



Day 4: Nehemiah 8:1-12

- Dah, dah, dah, dah!!! Ezra shows up in Nehemiah!! Again we see the power of coming together as a community to mark a significant moment; to remember. Nehemiah is a leader, but he needs a priest for this! What do they do to commemorate the completion of the wall?

- How does this fit your thoughts about worship? Are you surprised?

- Look at the power of the Word of God! How do the people respond?

Sometimes we fear the Word because of the conviction it brings, but here we see God calling them to freedom, to enjoying life, to having empathy and compassion for others.

Day 5: Nehemiah 8:13-18

- Because of the long exile, many Jews had forgotten about the Feast of Booths, a ritual God asked the people to celebrate to remember how God called them out of slavery and protected them when they had nothing. In the Old Testament God continually tells his people to “Remember.” Protestant churches don’t do a great job of remembering—corporately and privately—the faithfulness of God. Do you have a habit of remembering alone or as a group of people? Does their rediscovery of the Feast of Booths inspire you in any way?

## Week Eight

### Day 1: Nehemiah 9:1-8

- The celebration and praise continues! Describe the affect this moment has on the people. How do they respond to and participate in these moments of worship?

### Day 2: Nehemiah 9:6-31

- The people corporately remember the God's character and his relationship with them. For each of the following verses, jot down the characteristics of God that you see recounted.
- V6
- V7-8
- V9-11
- V12-14
- V15-17
- V18-20
- V21-15
- V26-31

### Day 3: Nehemiah 9:32-38

- Having been through exile, return, work, trials, and now worship as they recount God's faithfulness, describe the intimacy they feel with God.

Day 4: Ezra 9:1-15

- In contrast to the Jews' celebration after the wall is finished, the people are distracted after the temple is completed and they return to Jerusalem. Because they have committed their lives to people who are destructive and not concerned with the things of God, they are disoriented and feel separated from God's purpose. Look back to Ezra 7 (v6, 25-28). How is Ezra described and respected?

- How does Ezra respond to the people he is leading?

Day 5: Ezra 9:6-15

- Specifically describe his confession. Does anything startle you?

- Describe Ezra's leadership here. How could you become a leader in confessing, like Ezra? How can you emulate his response in your life, your job, your relationships, and your family?

## Week Nine

Day 1: Ezra 10:1-5

- How did the people respond to Ezra's grief and humility?
- Even though their response is out of the ordinary, this is included in Scripture to remind us that deep down, all people want someone to stop them in their unhealthiness. How does Ezra accomplish this, and how does that challenge you?

Day 2: Ezra 10:6-44

- Describe the process of healing and redemption here. Is it quick and easy, or does the mess take a long time to clean up? How long does it take them?
- What does this teach you about the consequences of sin in your own life? If there is mess in your life, don't give up! Keep doing the work everyday, inviting God to restore you. Can you begin confronting your own mess here?

Day 3: Nehemiah 10:1-31

- Reflect here on God's restoration of His people, as they rebuilt the temple, the wall, and then fully return from exile to repopulate their city. What rituals did they go through together as a people to turn their hearts back toward God as they return (review Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah 8 & 9)?

- God is never content just to rebuild his “things”; He is concerned with the hearts of His people toward Him and toward each other. What did this process produce in the people? Do you see glimpses of restoration and redemption here?

Day 4: Nehemiah 10:28-31

- Having gone through that, the people enter a covenant with God. Describe the details of their commitment.
- Reflect for a moment on the covenant God has entered with you. He is fully committed to claiming you, fulfilling both sides of your covenant so that you can live with freedom and security, inspiring you to offer the same to others.

Day 5: Nehemiah 10:32-39

- Out of gratitude and security, the people do not simply commit to God, but also to His people (the pre-Christ church, if you will). What do they commit to generously give the people of God?
- To what are you committed? To God? To His people? To your family? What is God calling you to here?

## Week Ten

### Day 1: Nehemiah 11:1-36

- Think about these families, and the ratio of who agreed to move back into Jerusalem. How are they honoring their family legacies with their choices?
- Many of these families had committed to rebuilding a temple and a wall that could not even provide refuge for them. What is the lesson you can learn from their commitment?

### Day 2: Nehemiah 11:1-36

- As you think about your own family, do you want independence from them or do you want to duplicate what came before you? How is God calling you to pause and acknowledge the family of which you are a part, and the lessons they have passed down (good or bad)?

### Day 3: Nehemiah 12:1-26

- Describe the role of the priests and Levites throughout the exile until now. Were they serving in a vacuum and all alone? How do you think they felt for all those years?
- Are you committed to doing a hard thing even when you do not see fruit? To “offer thanksgiving” (v8 &24), to keep watch and stand guard (v24-25). Use this time to think about your own faithfulness, knowing you might not be as alone as you feel!

Day 4: Nehemiah 12:27-43

- Describe the big moment of dedication here, and what it took to get here!
  
- Compare this day to all the other hard, anonymous, faithful-with-no-fruit days. In your own life, stop and celebrate the big moments, while also letting this scripture interrogate your heart that God is beautifully working on you in the in-between moments as well.

Day 5: Nehemiah 12:44-47

- How is this moment connected to a bigger history?
  
- Do you feel like your life is full of these big celebration moments or the small, assigned tasks? How have the lives of Ezra and Nehemiah reminded you to find dignity in the small things?

## Week Eleven

Day 1: Nehemiah 13:1-3

- Is this a hard reading for you? Why?
- What do these curses and exclusions tell you about God's intense commitment to helping you make Him your only priority and value system?

Day 2: Nehemiah 13:3-14

- Describe what happens when Nehemiah goes away, and what rules are being broken.
- These rules are not there to be mean, but to ensure the flourishing of the entire community. Reflect on your own life. When you don't do your job, or indulge an unhealthy person, how does it affect your entire community?

Day 3: Nehemiah 13:15-30

- What happens here when a few leaders get distracted?
- Why does God care so much about the Sabbath and what is it meant for?
- Why does God want intermarriage to stop? How does it prevent us from being fully restored?



#### Day 4: Nehemiah and Ezra

- Reflect on your own life. What little mistakes or compromises can and do hurt the people around you, yourself, and the Kingdom of God?
  
- Think about the sacrifices, commitments and covenants made in Ezra and Nehemiah. What does that teach you about God's design for the flourishing of individuals and of communities? Ask Him to show you how your own choices can affect the people around you. Can you expand your "us", and allow God to use you to strengthen your community?

#### Day 5: Nehemiah and Ezra

- In our introduction, we claimed that God was committed to rebuilding, restoring and redeeming His people. Which moments stand out to you in the story of the return from Babylonian exile? How will they shape your life?
  
- The Jewish people had been distracted by other gods, people and promises of power. Even after God restored them to Jerusalem, they were easily distracted again! As you leave the study of Ezra and Nehemiah, know that you will fail, and know that God can use your failures and your faithfulness to restore you and so many others to flourishing.