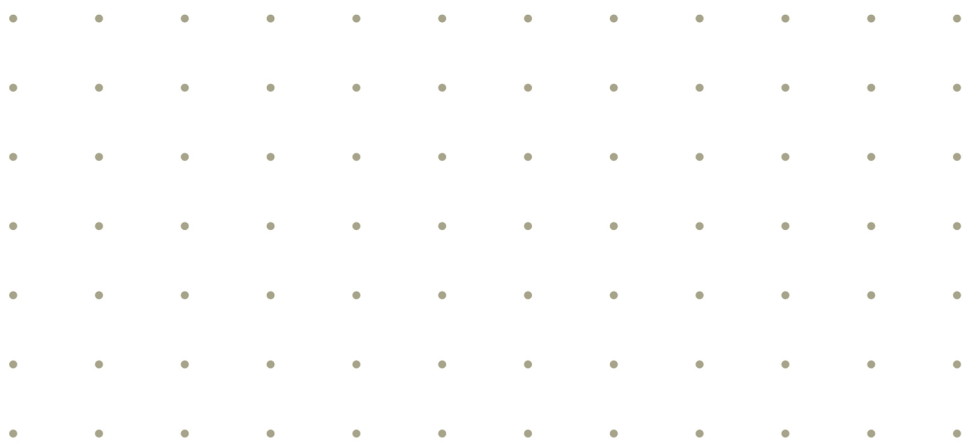




EZRA *and*
NEHEMIAH

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Kathleen B. Nielson



J. I. Packer

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

Dane C. Ortlund

SERIES EDITOR

“This series is a tremendous resource for those wanting to study and teach the Bible with an understanding of how the gospel is woven throughout Scripture. Here are gospel-minded pastors and scholars doing gospel business from all the Scriptures. This is a biblical and theological feast preparing God’s people to apply the entire Bible to all of life with heart and mind wholly committed to Christ’s priorities.”

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KNOWING THE BIBLE

J. I. Packer, Theological Editor
Dane C. Ortlund, Series Editor
Lane T. Dennis, Executive Editor

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Genesis	Ecclesiastes	John	Colossians,
Exodus	Isaiah	Acts	Philemon
Leviticus	Jeremiah	Romans	Hebrews
Joshua	Daniel	1 Corinthians	James
Ruth, Esther	Hosea	2 Corinthians	Revelation
Ezra, Nehemiah	Matthew	Galatians	
Psalms	Mark	Ephesians	
Proverbs	Luke	Philippians	

• • • • • •

J. I. PACKER is Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College (Vancouver, BC). Dr. Packer earned his DPhil at the University of Oxford. He is known and loved worldwide as the author of the best-selling book *Knowing God*, as well as many other titles on theology and the Christian life. He serves as the General Editor of the ESV Bible and as the Theological Editor for the *ESV Study Bible*.

LANE T. DENNIS is President of Crossway, a not-for-profit publishing ministry. Dr. Dennis earned his PhD from Northwestern University. He is Chair of the ESV Bible Translation Oversight Committee and Executive Editor of the *ESV Study Bible*.

DANE C. ORTLUND is Executive Vice President of Bible Publishing and Bible Publisher at Crossway. He is a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary (MDiv, ThM) and Wheaton College (BA, PhD). Dr. Ortlund has authored several books and scholarly articles in the areas of Bible, theology, and Christian living.

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A 12-WEEK STUDY



Kathleen B. Nielson

 **CROSSWAY®**

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of that book of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, for help in understanding the Bible in this deeper way, we would urge the reader to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available online at www.esvbible.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online. Additional 12-week studies covering each book of the Bible will be added as they become available.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer
Lane T. Dennis

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH



Getting Acquainted

Ezra and Nehemiah were, for centuries, received as one book narrating the return of God's exiled¹ people to their land, as under Persian rule they were allowed to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. These two books cover three different waves of returning exiles, from 538 to 433 BC. But they tell one story: the restoration of God's covenant² people according to his Word—which they are now called afresh to obey.

This restoration required, first of all, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstitution of ceremonial worship. The first leader, Zerubbabel, led the initial wave of exiles back to Jerusalem to accomplish this goal (Ezra 1–6). The second wave came more than half a century later, led by Ezra, who rebuilt not the temple but the people, teaching them—and calling them to obey—the law of Moses (Ezra 7–10).

Thirteen years after Ezra arrived, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. He first led the people to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 1–6). Then, along with Ezra, he sought to restore the people (Nehemiah 7–13) as God's holy nation, followers of his Word.

The restoration was not complete, however. These books picture God's people regathered but struggling—they are poor subjects of a foreign king; their city

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

is devastated; enemies oppress from without; sin threatens from within. We see the faithful hand of God mercifully preserving his people according to his promises. We also see the dire need for the perfect fulfillment of God's promises in the salvation accomplished by his Son. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 799–803 and 821–823; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Placing Ezra and Nehemiah in the Larger Story

Ezra and Nehemiah give the last glimpse of Old Testament history. It is a desolate glimpse in many ways. This people is the “offspring” (literally “seed”) of Abraham, blessed as God promised, growing into a great nation (Gen. 12:1–7), but then punished for their rebellion through enemies who defeated them and took them into exile. These books show God's unfailing promises to bless this people, restored to their land and the privilege of worshiping God in his temple. But they are a weak remnant, serving the Persian king, with no sign of the promised eternal king on the throne of David (see 2 Sam. 7:12–17). These books cause us to peer forward to the coming of that King, that Deliverer who would bring blessing through this people to all the nations of the world.

Key Passage

“O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants.” (Neh. 1:5–6)

Date and Historical Background

Because of his people's unfaithfulness, God had allowed the northern kingdom to be conquered by the Assyrians (722 BC), and the southern kingdom of Judah to be conquered by the Babylonians (586 BC). Both defeats involved exile to foreign lands. When King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonians, he issued a decree (538 BC) allowing the exiled Jews to return to their land. Ezra and Nehemiah shine a light into the postexilic years, telling of three main returns and three central leaders: Zerubbabel (538 BC), Ezra (458 BC), and Nehemiah (445 BC).

Both Ezra and Nehemiah contain first-person narratives; the stories in Nehemiah are especially substantial and vivid. The author(s) of the remaining sections are unknown. The two books were probably finished soon after the events of Nehemiah, approximately 430 BC.

Outline

Ezra

- I. Cyrus's Decree and the *First* Return of Exiles from Babylon (1:1–2:70)
- II. The Returned Exiles Rebuild the *Temple* on Its Original Site (3:1–6:22)
- III. Ezra the Priest Leads the *Second* Return to Rebuild the *People* by Teaching the Law of Moses (7:1–8:36)
- IV. Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage (9:1–10:44)

Nehemiah

- I. Nehemiah Leads the *Third* Return to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its *Walls* (1:1–2:20)
- II. The Wall Is Rebuilt, Despite Difficulties (3:1–7:4)
- III. A Record of Those Who Returned from Exile (7:5–7:73)
- IV. The *People* Are Rebuilt around God's Word, Leading to Covenant Renewal (8:1–10:39)
- V. Results of Covenant Renewal (11:1–12:47)
- VI. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (13:1–13:31)

As You Get Started

Read the first chapter of Ezra and the first two chapters of Nehemiah. What common words and themes emerge?

Read through each book without stopping. What stands out? What questions do you have at the start of this study?

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

We will learn from some great examples of leadership in these books. But for what reasons will it be important to focus on God’s perfect ways, not simply on Ezra’s or Nehemiah’s pretty good ones?

What are some of your specific hopes and prayers for this study of Ezra and Nehemiah?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life through your study of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Definitions

¹ **Exile** – Several relocations of large groups of Israelites/Jews have occurred throughout history, but “the exile” typically refers to the Babylonian exile, that is, Nebuchadnezzar’s relocation of residents of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC (residents of the northern kingdom of Israel had been resettled by Assyria in 722 BC).

² **Covenant** – A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship, a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. Throughout Old Testament times, God established covenants with his people, all of which he faithfully keeps, and all of whose benefits climax in Christ, who inaugurates the new covenant in his blood (1 Cor. 11:25).



THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH tell of God's steadfast love toward Israel after their return from exile. The Lord raised up Ezra and Nehemiah to reestablish the nation by rebuilding the temple and city walls and by turning the people back to his Word.

In this 12-week study, Kathleen Nielson shows readers God's mercy and faithfulness demonstrated in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, encouraging Christians toward sincere repentance and persevering hope.

ABOUT THE *KNOWING THE BIBLE* SERIES

Over the course of 12 weeks, these studies explore books of the Bible and:

- Ask thoughtful questions to spur discussion
- Show how each passage unveils the gospel
- Tie the text in with the whole story of Scripture
- Illuminate the doctrines taught in each passage
- Invite you to discover practical implications
- Help you better understand and apply God's Word

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author, *According to Plan*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHLEEN B. NIELSON (PhD, Vanderbilt University) serves as the director of women's initiatives for the Gospel Coalition. She is a popular conference speaker and the author or editor of numerous books, including *Ruth and Esther: A 12-Week Study*, and the coeditor of *Here Is Our God* and *Word-Filled Women's Ministry*.

BIBLE STUDY

