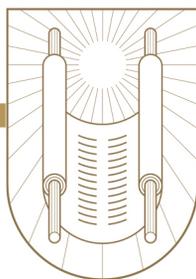


(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

**EZRA,  
NEHEMIAH,  
AND ESTHER**

**RESTORING  
*the* CHURCH**



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EZRA,  
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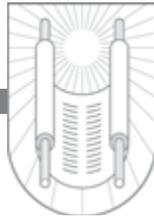
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(( PREACHING *the* WORD ))

# EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER

RESTORING  
*the* CHURCH



WALLACE P. BENN

R. Kent Hughes  
*Series Editor*

**CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS



To Lindsay Jane Benn, my beloved wife of over forty years,  
without whose love, prayers, help, and encouragement this book  
would never have been finished.

And in memory of the late Rev. Dr. J. Alec Motyer, who taught me  
to love the Old Testament as well as the New and encouraged me to  
preach it as God's Word written.

*Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!*

*Will you be angry with us forever?*

*Will you prolong your anger to all generations?*

*Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?*

*Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.*

PSALM 85:4-7

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our

ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes

# Preface

When my dear friend Kent Hughes originally asked me to write this preaching commentary, I had loved and benefited from preaching through Nehemiah many times. I had used it too in each new church situation I found myself in to set an agenda for the leadership team by examining where the “walls” of the particular work were built and where they were broken down and needed attention. Always, under God, Nehemiah helped and mobilized us to see what was encouraging and in particular what needed attention and how we could address this by catching a renewed vision for the glory of God and the extension of his kingdom.

I had neglected Ezra, however, and failed to see that really Ezra/Nehemiah is one book with the same heartbeat expressed in slightly different ways. Both are concerned with the restoration of the church in Jerusalem and Judea. Both are energized through prayer and belief in the steadfast promise-keeping nature of the God they worship. Both see that if God’s people are to be what God wants them to be, then the Word of God, and obedience to it, must be central for their life and health and for the effectiveness of their God-given mission to be a light to the world. Both men are godly leaders, with somewhat different temperaments, but with the same love and same purpose to see God’s name honored afresh as the church is restored according to the promise of God. The two complement one another—Ezra, the priest with a passion to teach and preach God’s Word, and Nehemiah, the lay leader whose God-given organizational skills and prayerfulness make spiritual reformation possible. I have since loved preaching through Ezra many times too.

What about the book of Esther, this unusual and brilliantly written dramatic book about “Where is God in a pagan world?” Was he still with his people in pagan Susa? As we shall see, he was with his people, working out his saving purposes for them. This is a wonderful book for believers living in a very secular world who sometimes wonder how they will cope and what God is up to. It is also a wonderful book to teach about the providence of God, a much-neglected doctrine among modern evangelical Christians. I have now preached through Esther many times with delight and profit.

The position canonically and historically of these books written after the exile is also of particular significance to us, as I believe the church in the West

is going through a time of exile or judgment because of its manifest unfaithfulness to the gospel and the Word of God. Despite many encouragements, liberal teaching has eroded confidence in the Holy Scriptures, and we are not winning generally against the huge neo-pagan secular and materialistic tide. May God have mercy on us and restore, revive, and bless his people so that our nations may once again be shaken by the power of the gospel to change hearts and transform lives. These three books tell us the kind of people God raises up and uses in bringing reformation and revival and how he brings about the restoration of the church of their time. *Lord, please do it again, and use us to be instruments in your hands!*

But these books only partially fulfill their promise. As three books among the very last books of the Old Testament, the promises of God await the coming of great David's greater Son, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. It is only in him that all the promises of God find their "Yes" (2 Corinthians 1:20). But these books do speak of Jesus, show us our need of him, and encourage us to come to him, remain faithful to him, and rejoice in all the blessings we receive in him. These books are part of God's Word written for our learning, and we neglect them to our great loss.

My grateful thanks to Dr. R. Kent Hughes and all at Crossway for their kindness and patience and for giving me the privilege to write this commentary in the Preaching the Word series.

Wallace P. Benn  
Easter 2021

# Timelines and Chronology

## A. Prophecies Fulfilled

Isaiah 44:28; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10-14; 31:7; 33:9; Zechariah 4:10

## B. Timeline



## C. Chronology

### Chronology of Ezra

Event	Year	Reference
Cyrus king of Persia captures Babylon	539 B.C.	Dan. 5:30-31
First year of King Cyrus; issues proclamation freeing Jewish exiles to return	538-537	Ezra 1:1-4
Jewish exiles, led by Sheshbazzar, return from Babylon to Jerusalem	537?	Ezra 1:11
Altar rebuilt	537	Ezra 3:1-2
Temple rebuilding begins	536	Ezra 3:8
Adversaries oppose the rebuilding	536-530	Ezra 4:1-5
Temple rebuilding ceases	530-520	Ezra 4:24
Temple rebuilding resumes (2nd year of Darius)	520	Ezra 5:2; compare Hag. 1:14
Temple construction completed (6th year of Darius)	516	Ezra 6:15
Ezra departs from Babylon to Jerusalem (arrives in 7th year of Artaxerxes)	458	Ezra 7:6-9
Men of Judah and Benjamin assemble at Jerusalem	458	Ezra 10:9
Officials conduct three-month investigation	458-457	Ezra 10:16-17

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## 16 Timelines and Chronology

### Chronology of Nehemiah

Event	Month/Day	Year	Reference
Hanani brings Nehemiah a report from Jerusalem (20th year of Artaxerxes I)		445-444 B.C.	1:1
Nehemiah before King Artaxerxes	1	445	2:1
Nehemiah arrives to inspect Jerusalem walls		445	2:11
Wall is finished	6/25	445	6:15
People of Israel gather	7	445	7:73—8:1
People of Israel celebrate Feast of Booths	7/15-22	445	8:14
People of Israel fast and confess sins	7/24	445	9:1
Nehemiah returns to Susa (32nd year of Artaxerxes I)		433	5:14; 13:6

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### Chronology in Esther

Reference	Event	Month	Day	Year of Ahasuerus's Reign	Year
1:3	Ahasuerus holds his banquets			3	483 B.C.
2:16	Esther goes to Ahasuerus	10		7	479
3:7	Haman casts his lots	1		12	474
3:12	Haman issues his decree	1	13	12	474
3:13	Date planned for annihilation of the Jews	12	13	13	473
8:9	Mordecai issues his decree	3	23	13	473
8:12; 9:1	Day upon which Jews could defend themselves from attack	12	13	13	473
9:6-10, 20-22	Ten sons of Haman executed; Feast of Purim celebrated	12	14, 15	13	473

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### D. Postexilic Returns to Jerusalem

Sequence	Date	Scripture	Jewish Leader	Persian Ruler
First	538 B.C.	Ezra 1—6	Zerubbabel, Joshua	Cyrus
Second	458 B.C.	Ezra 7—10	Ezra	Artaxerxes
Third	445 B.C.	Nehemiah 1—13	Nehemiah	Artaxerxes

E Z R A

## The Timeline of Ezra



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# 1

## Our God Reigns—See God

EZRA 1



WHY STUDY EZRA? Because it is a neglected part of God’s Word written, and no part of the Holy Scriptures should be neglected. Bruce Waltke talks about it in his excellent *Old Testament Theology* as “a story the church needs to hear but rarely does.”<sup>1</sup> It is the story of a second exodus as God’s people return from seventy years of captivity in Persia, and after a period of judgment it is a story of grace, forgiveness, and restoration. It is a story of new beginnings and a period of church reviving.

In a powerful and beautiful passage, Ezra (9:6–9) describes what has been going on. He confesses the sin of the professing church of his day (the people of Judah, the Jews), which has been the cause of the terrible events of 586 B.C. when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the last portion of the people were taken into exile. But now in grace and mercy, and in fulfillment of his promise, God is reviving, restoring, and bringing the people home. It is a time of “a little reviving in our slavery” when God has shown his steadfast love for his people and his willingness “to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem” (9:8–9). Ezra describes a time of church revival and restoration after a period of difficulty and judgment.

Back in the 1980s, J. I. Packer suggested that the church in the West was going through a period of judgment for its manifold disobedience and unfaithfulness to God’s Word. I trust you come from a church situation that is encouraging, seeing growth, and knowing God’s blessing, but it is certainly true that despite many encouraging signs the church in the Western world (unlike the church elsewhere) is not winning overall against the huge secular, unbelieving,

materialistic tide it is facing. I remember a bishop from Africa telling me in 1998 that more people were becoming Christians in his diocese than were being born! That's hugely encouraging, and we in the West need to realize how well the church is doing in the Two-Thirds World, often even in the face of extreme difficulty and persecution. We need that reviving too! The old mainstream Protestant denominations are riven with disagreement between those who want to be faithful to the Scriptures and those who simply wish to be in tune with the values of our time whatever the cost. We need God to revive and restore us, bringing us back to joy in the gospel of grace and the abiding truths of the Bible as the crucial answer to our deepest needs before God. On a more personal note, which one of us reading this text is as obedient to God's Word as we should be or takes with wisdom and courage all the opportunities God gives us to live and witness for him? We need reviving too, so that in a fresh way we may be the people God wants us to be. So Ezra is deeply relevant.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one, and they need to be read, studied, and ideally preached together. They cover three returns of God's people to the land. The first and main one in 538 B.C. included the building of the second temple (Solomon's temple being the first, destroyed in 586 B.C.), which was finished in 516 B.C. (see Ezra 1—6). The second return was in 458 B.C. with Ezra himself leading a group (see Ezra 7—10). The third return to Jerusalem was in 445 B.C. under the leadership of Nehemiah. This period covered the reign of four Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes) and covers approximately the last 100 years or so of Old Testament history (see the earlier chart). It was a period of God's blessing and faithfulness despite continuing sin among the people, but a time that looked forward to what God would do to bless and restore his people with the coming of the messianic king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ezra shows us how God goes about blessing and reviving his people. If we are to know his reviving touch, we should ask God to do the same fundamental things among us as he did among his people then. What is the first step in God reviving his people? It is to renew their vision of his sovereign power and covenant faithfulness.

Ezra 1 follows directly from the previous book (2 Chronicles 36:22–23) and tells us that God's Word can be trusted because God keeps his promises. The decree of Cyrus is the direct result of the fulfillment of prophecies that were stated long before. See the remarkable mention of Cyrus by name in Isaiah 44:28:

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.”

Josephus, the Jewish historian, speculated that Cyrus—when shown this prophecy or when reading it himself—was then prompted by it to take action. Be that as it may, Ezra says it was really God who stirred him to issue this decree (1:1).

Note also the specific prophecy mentioned by Ezra that is being fulfilled—Jeremiah 29:10–14:

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. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 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.

This was now happening, said Ezra. (See also Jeremiah 25:11; 31:7–8; 33:9; Zechariah 4:10.)

### Redeeming and Restoring His People

God keeps his covenant promises to his people, and his word of promise can be trusted now as then. Ezra was telling the story of God’s redeeming and restoring his people to praise his name and bear witness to him in the world of his day.

The book of Ezra is a story of God’s grace and mercy that displays his steadfast love for his people as he refuses to give up on them.

### Working through Human History to Achieve His Purpose

If you were a Judean slave in Persia, the superpower of the day, you might have wondered how on earth you would ever get back to Jerusalem. Perhaps there would be a coup and you could escape. Unlikely, given Cyrus’s power. Maybe someone would poison the king and in the ensuing chaos you could slip away. That was not the way God did it at all. Instead in a peaceful way he “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” (1:1) to issue the decree recorded in verses 2–4.

This is remarkable in many ways, and the way it is phrased in Ezra 1 shows a clear respect for “the God of heaven.” This was a smart political move

on Cyrus's part, and though of particular benefit to the people of Judea in exile, we know from The Cyrus Cylinder (a renowned document in the British Museum) that such a decree was extended to many other ethnic and religious groups as well. In the vast empire that Cyrus had conquered and sought to control, there were many ethnic groups that had been exiled and displaced. Sending them back on a mission to restore their places of worship would hopefully create a thankful and loyal population throughout his empire. Cyrus was, it seems, a polytheist (note the phrase "may his God be with him," v. 3) and a worshiper of Marduk. The decree as recorded by Ezra was in a form amenable to the Jewish exiles, but unknown to Cyrus, it was all for their benefit under the sovereign hand of their God.

There is a key lesson to be learned here. In our unstable world of super-powers and wars and rumors of wars, it is not Joe Biden or Vladimir Putin or anyone else who is in control—it is God. His purposes to save, bless, and keep a people for his glory cannot and will not be thwarted. Our God reigns, and he works throughout history and even uses unbelievers to achieve his purposes. If he can use Cyrus, he can use anybody. He rules and overrules the course of human history for his ends. How tremendously encouraging it must have been to a humanly insignificant and captive people to know that their destiny was in safe hands and that God had the power to keep his promises and accomplish all his plans for the good and blessing of his people. In the Western world today, when Christians are often marginalized and seem powerless to stop the neo-pagan tide, how encouraging it is to know that our God still reigns and works out his purposes. My old college principal, mentor, and friend J. Alec Motyer used to say, "The sovereignty of God is the pillow on which I lay my head at night." That has been my and my family's joyful experience for many years now.

### Energizing, Stirring Up, and Motivating His People to Do His Will (for Their Joy)

The renewed vision of God's grace and power was the key ingredient in stirring up the people to passionately obey God and trust his promises. The same God that stirred Cyrus stirred the peoples' hearts too. God was at work motivating and energizing them to get up and go (1:5), and it seems that the leaders took the initiative in this. The motivation to obey the Lord, trust his promises, and take the opportunity provided by Cyrus's amazing decree in God's good providence is the precursor to blessing. Obedience is always the way to God's blessing, and it is God's blessing that brings joy.

### Providentially Providing for His People in Unexpected Ways

Cyrus suggested that the people of God who stayed behind should support those who were going with needful gifts given generously (1:4, 6). Many commentators suggest, I think rightly, that this included helpful gifts from pagan neighbors as well as believers. This amazing activity shows God behind the event and mirrors what happened in the first exodus (see Exodus 12:35–36).

Even more extraordinary than this, Cyrus commanded that all the vessels taken in plunder by Nebuchadnezzar should be returned (Ezra 1:7). This amounted to a large number of pots and pans, including 5,400 vessels of gold and silver (1:11). There were no statues or idols of any kind since they were forbidden in temple worship. The treasurer in charge of the handover gave them all to the safekeeping of Sheshbazzar, “the prince of Judah,” of the royal line of David (1:8), a key figure at this point.

God was showing extreme restorative generosity to his people, who would set out laden with gifts and returned treasure. Anyone who knows the stories of battles by various countries to get the British Museum to return treasures taken in conquest during the days of the British Empire will not fail to be amazed at this provision. The people were setting off on a difficult journey, but they were encouraged by God’s gracious providence and provision for them. They must have had a song in their hearts as well as being excited and probably also somewhat nervous about what lay ahead of them. The God who keeps his promises would not fail them now!

### New Testament Perspective

It is important that we see the significance of these truths for us as worked out in the New Testament. All these things were written for our learning, and often Old Testament stories reveal truth further displayed and developed in the New Testament.

In Paul’s magnificent vision of all that we as believers have in the risen Christ because of his substitutionary death and bodily resurrection and ascension, he prays that Christians may see:

... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:19–23)

Notice the phrase describing Christ “as head over all things to [or perhaps more helpfully, “for”] the church.” Christ’s sovereign authority and power is for the benefit of the church, and he exercises his authority to save, keep, bless, and bring to glory his redeemed people. God’s providential care and sovereignty are exercised through history for the glory of his name and the benefit of his people. So Paul can elsewhere say that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). Our God reigns, and he reigns in grace and love, working out his purposes for us if we belong to him.

When we have felt stirred to serve our Lord and seek to do his will, it is not our own strength that has so moved us. God has enabled us to so respond; so we should give him the praise. Listen again to Paul:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

We need to respond to and obey God with all our hearts, but it is God who enables us to do that. As in the days of Ezra, so it is now.

Though the nations rage,  
Kingdoms rise and fall,  
There is still one King  
Reigning over all.  
So I will not fear for this truth remains:  
That my God is the Ancient of Days.

None above Him, none before Him,  
All of time in His hands.  
For His throne it shall remain and ever stand.  
All the power, all the glory,  
I will trust in His name;  
For my God is the Ancient of Days.

—Jonny Robinson, Rich Thompson, Michael Ray Farren, and Jesse Reeves\*

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