

Sermon: “Ezra + Nehemiah: Rebuilding Our Lives Around God”

Series: TaNaKh Dave Sattler NSAC June 21, 2026

Texts: Ezra 1:1-3a/3:3+11, 7:6/8-10, Nehemiah 1:3-7, 8:1a/5-6/8-10/18

Subtexts: Jeremiah 7:3b-4; Acts 3:19, Hebrews 10:25a

Sources: Bible Gateway, NIV Life Application Bible. Books: “*The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*” by Mark Boda (2017), “*Practicing the Way*” by John Mark Comer (2024), “*Opening Israel’s Scriptures*” by Ellen Davis (2019), “*Experiencing Jesus Really*” by John Eldridge (2025), “*The First Thousand Years*” by Robert Wilken (2012). Commentaries: James Hamilton, Douglas Nykolaishen & Andrew Schmutzer. Sermons: John Fortune (6/14/2026, NSAC), Simon Walmsley & Josh Carsola (6/3+17/2026, CT). Online: unsplash.com.

I. Introduction & Review:

- Welcome, everyone! My name’s Dave Sattler, and I’m one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. Thank you for joining us ... [online], first-timers, long-timers, people new to Canada, out-of-town guests, we’re excited you’ve made church a priority today!!
- It’s time now to look to God’s Word. At NSAC, we believe one of *the* primary ways *God speaks to us* and *shapes and guides our lives* is through *His Word*, the Bible.
- **<Slide>** Today we continue our sermon series called **TaNaKh**.
- TaNaKh is a combination of Hebrew letters, the people of Israel used to describe the Old Testament Scriptures.
- Sadly, these days, the Old Testament often gets a bad rap. Deemed by some to be ‘antiquated,’ ‘barbaric,’ or even ‘second rate,’ there are scholars and church leaders today who even wish to toss it out altogether.
- A warning from church history offers guidance.
- With the New Testament freshly written and circulated, 3rd Century scholar and theologian Origen of Alexandria “taught Christians to read the *entire* Bible as the living Word of God, a book that is always fresh, always new, always contemporary, always more profound than it appears on the surface.” - Wilken, p62-63
- Not just the *New Testament*, but ***TaNaKh, too, showcases the Grand Narrative: God works in history to restore humanity and help them rebuild their lives around relationship with Him.*** This is the story in which we all live, and, belong.
- **<Slide>** Have you ever tried to *build* something?
- I know we have many talented builders in the room. But, even *the most experienced*, might admit that building rarely goes as planned.

- Many years ago, our house in Lynn Valley backed onto a ravine and we had four little kids.
- And, for some strange reason, I thought *I* could build us a back fence.
- So, I visited Home Depot, studied chain-link fences, and, eventually built one to span the back of our property. Quite proud, when no one was looking, I would stand on my back deck and admire my handiwork.
- For about one week...
- **<Slide>** Then, a bear climbed over it and *toppled* my masterpiece—[and my pride along with it]. And I was forced to **rebuild**.
- Fans of the Vancouver Canucks know this word well: **rebuild**.
- Controversial. Our hockey team has floundered in the messy middle or near the bottom of the league for the past decade. And, management stubbornly refused to concede. They signed many poor players to bad contracts, while all the while using rhetoric like ‘tweak,’ ‘retool,’ or ‘rework,’ when what the team actually needed was a **rebuild**. Mercifully, a few weeks ago, under new leadership, the **rebuild** finally began.
- And *this* brings us to the situation in today’s TaNaKh writings.
- **<Slide>** As Pastor John preached last week, God, in His mercy and love, confronted His people through the prophet Jeremiah: “Reform your ways and your actions,” [the Lord says], “and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” - Jeremiah 7:3b-4
- Their idols were subtle. In their smug religiosity, the people put their trust in the beautiful temple *building* and *their* acts of worship.
- They’d come to rely upon the power and protection of the city walls *they’d* built—and *not* on God Himself. Idols are never good for us.
- So, as a consequence, **God allowed enemies to topple their idols** - the temple was destroyed, the walls were broken down, people were killed, and others were taken into exile to Babylon.
- **<Slide>** And, in exile, this is where **God raises up Ezra + Nehemiah, two of the most exemplary leaders in all the Bible**.
- These two are men of *God* and men of *action* (Organized! I counted 38 lists in Ezra + Nehemiah! I love making lists!!) [I dedicate this sermon to our beloved grandson, who bears the name Ezra. There he is.]
- Ezra + Nehemiah form just *one* book in the Hebrew Bible.

- Though we find them *midway* in *our* bibles, chronologically Ezra + Nehemiah belong at the end of the Old Testament. We'll look at 4 Scriptures and 4 Movements in the narrative today. Let's jump in...

II. **Scripture #1: Ezra 1:1-3a (3:3+11)**

<**Slide**> 1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, *the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia* to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 2 “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of His people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel.”

<Pray> “*Lord, thank You for Your Word. Please move me out of the way. Come speak to us by Your Spirit. We're hungry to hear from you.*”

III. <**Slide**> **Narrative Movement #1: God moves the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to return Jewish exiles to their homeland to rebuild the temple.**

- In the run of world history, we know the mighty Roman Empire - the backdrop for the New Testament. Before that, there was Alexander the Great. And, before him, came the great Persian Empire spanning several hundred years, and, setting the stage for the conclusion of TaNaKh.
- As consequence for disobeying God and refusing to heed the prophets' warnings, God's people were exiled to Babylon or Persia, in Persepolis near Iran's modern-day Shiraz—city of poets, literature, and flowers.
- Important to note the point of God's discipline is not to hurt or punish His children. ***God never disciplines without the offer of restoration.*** His plan is always to *restore*.
- In a passage that reads a bit like Exodus 1, the Lord *sees* His people's difficult situation - He *never* abandons them - and even goes so far as to *move* the heart of Cyrus the Great to rescue His people from exile.
- <**Slide**> APP - Perhaps you find yourself today feeling heavy under the weight of *our* world. Given geopolitics, disparities in global economics, oppressive systems that seem to govern our planet, it can be hard to feel *hopeful*, or, see a God Who remains in control with power above it all.

- And, Ezra + Nehemiah remind us of the truth God's people have held onto for centuries: ***God is sovereign over history and even directs global powers to fulfill His purposes.***
- This is what spurs God's people on when they return to their homeland.
- Ezra 3 says: "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they *built the altar* on [the temple's] foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord. (3a) With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; His love ... endures forever." (11) 'God is in control,' they celebrate.
- First things first. Before they rebuilt anything, they built an altar and the people *worshiped*; they praised God for giving them another chance.

IV. **Scripture #2: Ezra 7:6/8-10**

<Slide> 6 Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, *for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.* 8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. 9 He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. 10 For Ezra had *devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.*

V. <Slide> **Narrative Movement #2: Teacher Ezra returns to lead God's people in spiritual renewal.**

- Fast forward 80 years and a few Persian kings. By this time, the temple in Jerusalem would have mostly been rebuilt. But, the people of God likely didn't know how to use it—or how to relate to God even.
- So, because His people were in desperate need of *spiritual renewal*, God prompts King Artaxerxes to send teacher Ezra to his homeland (a 4 month journey away) to run a religious education program.
- Like I said back in the sermon on Exodus: God took His people out of Egypt, but then He needed to take Egypt out of His people.
- Slavery and exile have their way of conforming a people to the culture all around them. So, here in Ezra + Nehemiah, God takes His people out of Persia, but then God needs to 'take Persia' out of His people.
- APP - For those here today new to Christianity, or coming out of another religion, or, people versed in secularism (no faith at all), ***there is a***

certain ‘reprogramming’ - a ***transformation of heart and mind*** - ***God wants to do in us, to set us free to truly follow Him.***

- This is the sweet journey of discipleship into which the God of the Christian Story invites us.
- **<Slide>** Tough to find a leader the Bible speaks more glowingly about than Ezra. Did you catch it? Twice in four verses, it says: “the *hand of the Lord* was on Ezra.” (6/10) Wow!
- ILL - Now, for you, “the hand of God” might conjure up the image of Maradona’s famous handball goal that sunk England at the 1986 World Cup. [How about Canada’s amazing win on Thursday!!!!!!]
- That’s not what we’re talking about.
- Here’s the point: ***Sometimes God puts His hand on humans to lead His people.*** Christian leadership is never about *self*-promotion.
- From time to time, *God* raises up people, equips them to accomplish His task, puts His guiding hand of favour on them, and *works through them* to lead His people forward in beautiful, and even, miraculous ways.
- What also stands out about Ezra is his commitment to the Scriptures.
- ILL - Back when I was a young pastor in my 20s, I was summoned to a meeting with a church elder who was in his 80s. I’ll never forget his advice: “Dave, it’s not the *preaching* that’s difficult, it’s the *living*.”
- Says Ezra “devoted himself” to *study, observe, and teach* God’s Word to His people. (10) The order is important: study, live, *then* teach. Solid counsel for anyone aspiring to leadership in the church.

VI. **Scripture #3: Nehemiah 1:3-7**

- **<Slide>** 3 [Men came back from Judah and reported] to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” [Nehemiah writes:] 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, Who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, 6 let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer Your servant is praying before You day and night for Your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed

against You. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward You. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws You gave Your servant Moses.”

VII. <Slide> Narrative Movement #3: Site Superintendent Nehemiah begins with prayer and then returns to lead the people to rebuild the city wall.

- “Cupbearer to the king” (1:11b), Nehemiah’s job was to ensure the safety and quality of the king’s food and drink. God raises up Nehemiah and gives him a prominent spot in the ear of the King of Persia.
- Reports came that those who had returned to their homeland were in “great trouble”—the Jerusalem walls had been “broken down” and “burned with fire.” And, before Nehemiah does anything else (problem-solves, workshops a plan, presses the panic button, blames the situation on his useless colleagues), he meets this problem with *prayer*.
- At least 7 more times in the book, Nehemiah prays. Before he is a man of action (with his lists and plans), Nehemiah is a man of prayer.
- Prior to returning to Jerusalem, Nehemiah wrestles with God in prayer for 4 months—with much confession and crying out to God.
- Truth is: ***Before we tackle a problem, God invites us to pray.***
- APP - What is it *you’re* struggling with today? Perhaps you’ve received some hard news? From family or friends - here or back home? Maybe there’s a big problem that lies before you? Or, you’re grasping for wisdom or struggling to find direction?
- Pray. Bring it before Him. Pour your heart out to God.
- <Slide> The rebuild faces many challenges—from inside and outside.
- Back in the book of Ezra, enemy opposition and cost overruns halt temple construction for 20 years.
- Until, a royal document, lost in a Persian library, is found, and, in reading it, the current King of Persia is reminded that old King Cyrus had agreed to pay for it all! And ironically, *this* discovery reboots the project.
- Reality is: ***When God is at work, we can expect opposition.***
- The rest of the story tells how Site Superintendent Nehemiah leads the people in rebuilding the city walls in just 41 days! And, some of *those* walls are still standing to this day!! [I’ve seen them myself].

- I did a bit of a thought-experiment this week: What have I built, or, given my life to, that will still be standing 2,500 years from now? Hmmm ... definitely not my chain-link fence in Lynn Valley.

VIII. **Scripture #4: Nehemiah 8:1/5-6/8-10/18**

<**Slide**> The temple and walls had been rebuilt (7:1), the Israelites had “settled” in their towns (7:73), so “all the people came together as one” and ... 5 Ezra opened the book ... and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. 9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. 10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. 18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.”

IX. <**Slide**> **Narrative Movement #4: Ezra + Nehemiah gather God’s people and lead them in covenant renewal with God.**

- Remember God’s people were coming out of exile where they’d lost their sense of strength, faith, and purpose.
- These writings - Ezra + Nehemiah - were meant to *remind* them Who *God* is and who *they* are - so, apart from the cultural ideologies swirling all around them, they might re-gain their true identity.
- Our strength is not in buildings and structures or people and stuff.
- ***Strength is found when we build our lives on God’s love for us and His faithfulness to us.***
- ILL - Whenever I lose sight of the “joy of the *Lord*” or try to build *my* life on something else other than God, things don’t go well for me.
- Priest Ezra + Governor Nehemiah gather the people (they meet from dawn to noon for 7 days straight) and call them back into covenant relationship with their Creator. This is what we’ve all been made for.

- **<Slide>** Reading through the books of Ezra + Nehemiah, one of the ways the people of God had turned away was by intermarrying with foreigners. There's much about this topic in these writings.
- Those intimate heart-alliances - with people who did not share the same faith and values - had contributed to the people *drifting away* from God, their first love.
- APP - And, in my years of pastoral work with couples, I have to say: ***spiritual alignment is vital when considering a life partner.***
- When we ignore the faith component, compromise, or, convince ourselves the spiritual side of the relationship will simply work itself out, I believe we underestimate the impact.

X. Life Application

- **<Slide>** Okay, time now to quickly land the plane with some final life-application centred around the Big Idea of Ezra + Nehemiah: ***It's best we rebuild our lives around God.***
- Can you feel that hunger in your soul *only Jesus* can fill?
- For those of us who've tried to build our lives on *other* things: possessions, relationships, adventure, popularity, success, even our own religious achievement or ministry accomplishments, we need a rebuild.
- If we're honest, some of us have residual pain, disappointment, and deep brokenness as a result of chasing after, or, trying to build our lives on these things that can never satisfy.
- And today, we carry the baggage or wounds that go with it.
- Here's the hope: ***As we rebuild our lives around Him, Jesus wants to restore us and heal our brokenness.***
- APP - Belief that Jesus' death on the cross not only offers salvation for our sins, but also the hope of mental, emotional, and physical healing has long been an Alliance Church distinctive.
- Why in Acts 3:19, the apostle Peter teaches: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."
- When we surrender (turn to God), He welcomes us in, and offers His healing, restoration, and "refreshing." < Ministry Moment >

- **<Slide>** In his 2024 book “*Practicing the Way*” Pastor John Mark Comer writes: “A large swath of people who believe in God and even regularly attend church have not *re-architected* their daily lives on the foundation of apprenticeship to Jesus.” - Comer, p16
- APP - Truth is: We don’t simply *incorporate* God into *our* life. God is our life. We best build our lives on Jesus. ***Christian discipleship means re-architecting our daily lives around Jesus and His ways.***
- Problem is: our culture and our sin nature try to convince us of the merits of our own autonomy apart from God. I know, when I try to move ahead of God or call my own shots and ask God to bless them, things rarely go well for me or those around me - and, I live with great angst.
- And I am learning there is no true life apart from Jesus.
- **<Slide>** In Ezra + Nehemiah, something powerful happens when the people of God come together.
- ***Life built around God means gathering regularly with His people for worship and the Word.***
- John Eldridge writes: “Tuning in to the voice of God is essential to Christian discipleship. Being committed to *regular gatherings* for worship and the Word is how we hear God’s voice - discern His wisdom, feel His love, draw strength from His presence.” - Eldridge, p209
- Yes, God meets us in solitude—in private prayer or Bible reading. Sure, God speaks to us through creation.
- But, more often, God makes His presence known, touches us with His love, delivers His wisdom, correction, and healing, when we *gather with other people* to worship Him and hear His Word. This - *church* - is vitally important. Why the Scriptures say, “Let us not give up meeting together” (Hebrews 10:25a), and, the people of God have gathered every week for millennia. Because, people of NSAC, it’s right here, when we’re together, that God loves to move among us. Amen. Thanks for listening.
- **<Prayer Slide>** I invite the worship team to come now.
- Prayer is available, now, during worship, and, after the service.
- 9am: Steph & Josh; Andrea & Dan; 11am: Linda & Dugald; Lise & Renee.
- If something is on your heart today - a life situation God’s been nudging you about, I encourage you to bring it to Jesus - please go for prayer.
- Together now, let’s respond to God in worship.