

# STORIES WITHIN THE TRUE STORY



## Week Eighteen - Ezra-Nehemiah (Part One)

### **A Note to the Parents/Teachers**

*Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book telling the story of the exiles coming back from Babylonian captivity to rebuild their home in Jerusalem. It is often told as a glory story and used to talk about building projects. However, the actual story ends very anticlimactically showing there is still a problem in Israel and God's people are in need of a rescue even after exile.*

- **Big Idea:** God wants to fill us with His presence, but our hearts must change

### **Starter**

- **Evidences of Grace**  
*Ask kids to share ways they've seen God at work lately. Anything, big or small, which is good is from God. When a kid shares, encourage everyone to thank God together.*
- **Building Blocks**  
*Use legos or blocks or whatever you have in the room and allow the kids to build something. Talk about how today's story is about God's people rebuilding their home, but more importantly, God rebuilding their hearts.*

### **Sing Together**

### Story - from the books Ezra-Nehemiah

Well, just as God promised through prophets like Jeremiah, Babylon came and conquered Israel. Israel had been worshipping Babylon's gods so the real God let them see what it was like to be under their rule. It wasn't good. They lived in Babylon for many years, but eventually God set them free... sort of. Another nation called Persia came and defeated the Babylonian king and took power. Then God moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to allow Israel to go back to their home in Jerusalem, rebuild their temple, and rebuild their culture. Even to worship their own, true God.

**1st** - A man named Zerubbabel (*say that 5 times fast!*) led some of the people back to rebuild the altar —where sacrifices are made— and the temple —where they would worship. The temple used to be a place filled with the presence of God. But this time when they built it, God's presence was not there! The Israelites who came back from Babylon began fighting with those who never left Jerusalem. Something was wrong.

**2nd** - Some years after that, a new leader named Ezra brought another group of Israelites back from Babylon. This time the goal was to rebuild Israel's life around following God's law. He read the Scriptures to them and tried to rebuild all of their customs so they were following the true God, not Babylon's gods anymore. But some of the ways Ezra enacted these new rules were very difficult and not actually what God said to do. For example, he wanted anyone who married a Babylonian to divorce them, but this would split up families. Something was still wrong.

**3rd** - Finally, the king of Persia allowed a third leader named Nehemiah to come back in order to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Maybe this would solidify Israel being a nation again and God's presence would return to the temple. But there was fighting over who would be allowed in the walls and whether Israelites should associate with those outside. Something was still wrong.

Even though Israel and these leaders tried really hard to rebuild their nation upon the promises God gave their ancestors, even though they tried really hard to do it the right way, how they thought God wanted them to, the thing they couldn't change was their hearts. They needed someone or something to come and change their hearts in order to follow God.

One day the presence of God did show up, but not in the temple — in a man. Jesus was God who came to be with God's people and he gave his Spirit to fill our hearts - so that we would become the new temple filled with God's presence.

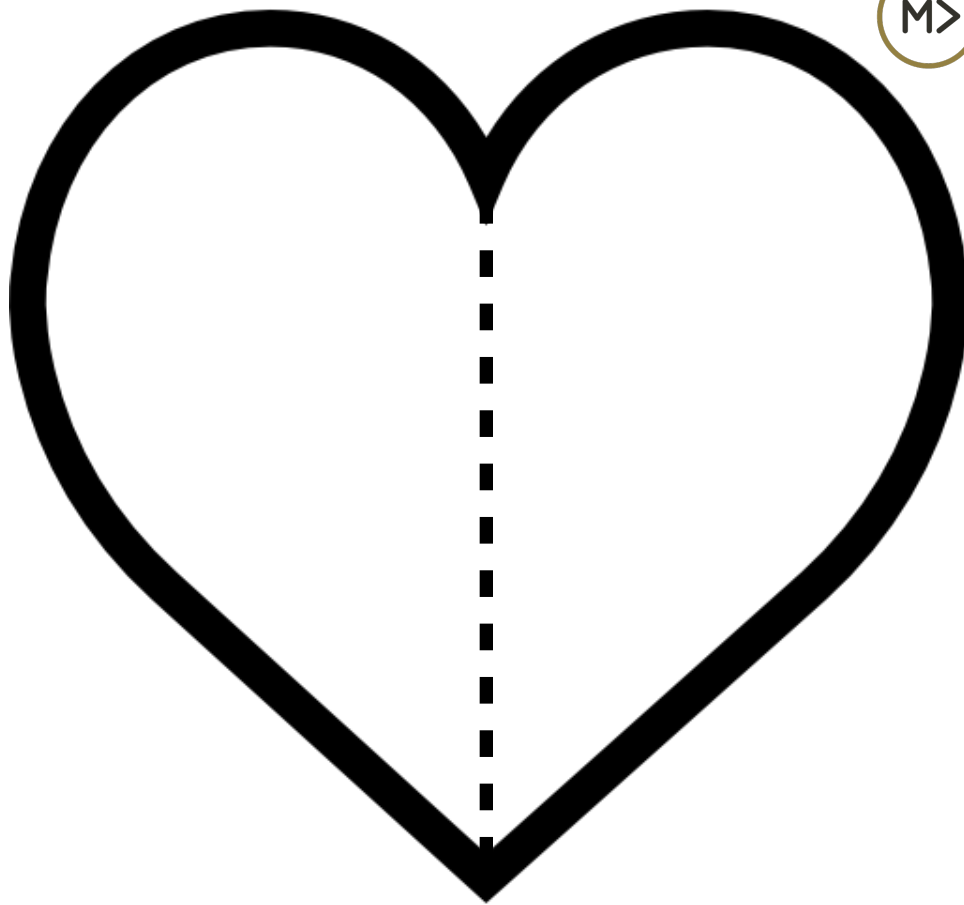
*[Dialogue Questions - you may use some or all]*

- Why do you think God's presence didn't fill the temple when it was rebuilt? *(the building was never the point - God was wanting to build His people)*
- Why do you think following all the right laws wasn't enough? *(the rules were never the point - God was wanting to give His people new hearts)*
- Why do you think rebuilding the walls didn't do the trick? *(God never wanted to keep people out of His promise, He wanted Israel to invite others in)*
- How did God finally send His presence to His people? *(through Jesus!)*

### Breakout Time

- **Prayer:**  
God, fill our hearts and our lives with your presence. Give us new hearts and build us into the people you want us to be. Amen.
- **Craft:**  
Cut out the two hearts on the attached page. Cut a line down the middle of the first heart, then glue the side of both pieces to the other heart. The goal is to open the heart from the middle to reveal the second heart underneath. Have the kids color the top heart as a stony, rocky heart and the one underneath as a clean heart.
- **BLESS Activity:** *\*For kids to do during the week\**  
*Because this Story is true, we want to be faithful to live in it. We ask Spirit to help us Bless, Listen, Eat, Speak, and Sabbath (rest & celebrate) in ways that tell the good news of God's Story.*

This week, focus on the **Listen** rhythm. Take some time this week to ask God to speak to you. Is there anything He wants you to do or say? Is there anything He wants to say to you about who you are? Write down what you think you hear and talk to your parents about it.



I will give you a new heart and  
put a new spirit in you;  
I will remove your heart of  
stone and give you  
a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26