

The Return

Ezra 1:1-11

Dr. Mark R. Bender

First Christian Church – Wichita Falls, Texas

June 14, 2020

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

2 'Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. **3**Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; **4**and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.'

5 The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. **6**All their neighbours aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered. **7**King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. **8**King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. **9**And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; **10**gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand; **11**the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

I think it started with our vacation in 2012. We had the fortunate opportunity that summer to join some of our family on an Alaskan cruise. Because it took more than a year of planning, we had plenty of time to get excited. And it was the long buildup that led the girls to start using countdown timers. They downloaded a countdown timer app on their phones that would tell them, up to the second, how long until we set sail. This countdown timer was designed to build anticipation, and that's just what it did. Regularly,

as we sat at the dinner table, one of the girls would give us an update on the number of days, hours, and minutes remaining until our cruise began.

Ever since that trip, they have been using that countdown timer to mark important events. The number of days until summer camp. The number of days until graduation. The number of days until a birthday. While countdown apps are relatively new, the countdown to important events is not. For years, kids have been counting down the number of days until school is out. At the same time, parents have been counting down the number of days until school begins. And nearly every one of us has had a bad day at work at which we count down the number of days until we can retire.

But all of these countdown timers have something in common. They all “count down” to something; to a fixed date and time. And most of the time, we are counting down because we anticipate what that day will bring. Vacation...freedom from homework...a few hours of peace during the day...the end of the daily grind. Yet for the exiles in our scripture lesson this morning, there was no countdown timer ticking down to a particular day. There was nothing to be excited about. As far as they knew, the chance to go back home probably wasn't going to happen in their lifetime. They assumed they were stuck in Babylon, far from home, and far from God's favor. They were in a place that many of us have found ourselves – clear memories of what used to be and, with each passing day, more convinced that will never happen again. That's how the exiles found themselves. They weren't counting down. They were counted out...that is, until something miraculous happens.

This morning we are beginning a new summer worship series called *The Return*. For the better part of the summer, we are going to be looking at two key books of the Old Testament named after two key figures: Ezra and Nehemiah. If you were to look for these two books in your Old Testament, you would find them before Job, the Psalms, and all the prophets – in other words, in the first half of the Old Testament. Yet,

chronologically, these two books, along with Esther, are the last chapter of the Old Testament narrative until the New Testament picks up the story four hundred years later.

And to understand what had caused these Israelites to be exiled from their homeland without much hope or anticipation of returning back home, we need to review some history. We need to rewind about 600 years before our scripture lesson, to around 1000 BC – 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus Christ - when David was King of Israel.

These were some of the best days ever for the Israelites. Israel was a mighty force – militarily, politically, economically, and socially. It seemed that they were fully experiencing God’s promise to David that God would establish David’s throne forever. But, the good times didn’t last. After David and his son Solomon ruled, the Israelites descended into chaos – a chaos much like they experienced before they had a king. A Civil War erupted and Israel divided into two nations.

The northern kingdom became known as Israel, and it had almost all of the natural resources, and the very best cash flow. Of the 12 tribes that had previously composed the nation of Israel, ten of them now identified with the northern kingdom. The southern kingdom, on the other hand, was known as Judah, and its best claim to power was Jerusalem, its capitol and the spiritual center of the people. The two tribes that identified as part of the southern kingdom were Benjamin and Judah.

For the better part of 300 years (about the same length of time that the United States has been a nation), this civil war and strife continued. Throughout this time, numerous kings ascended to the thrones of Israel and Judah. With the exception of a few good kings, these kings destroyed all of the things that had made Israel so mighty militarily, politically, economically, and socially. Worst of all, they led the people away from God’s instructions and intentions for them.

In time, the northern kingdom was completely destroyed by the new world power, the Assyrians. The writers of the Bible blame that destruction on ungodly leadership. The

narratives of 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, all suggest that there wasn't a single king in the north that was godly.

Once the northern kingdom was gone, the southern kingdom was seemingly a sitting duck. Yet, they held on for nearly 130 years because something else was happening on the world stage. There was a new kid on the block competing for dominance. The Babylonians had come on the scene and were locked in a power struggle with the Assyrians. While all that was taking place, God continued to speak to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah through prophets. Each of these prophets basically said the same thing: "Shape up or ship out." Either turn from your sin and return to God, or you will be conquered and taken into exile.

But the people didn't repent. They were convinced by false prophets that everything would be fine. They were safe and strong because they had the temple of the Lord and they were in the City of David, Jerusalem. The people, and their leaders, didn't listen to the prophets. Finally, in 587 BC, the Babylonians, who had overtaken the Assyrians as the world's superpower, took the people of Judah captive. But that wasn't all they did. They burned down the city of Jerusalem and transported all of the residents of the southern kingdom to an area of the world we now know as Iran and Iraq. And with each passing day, it seemed that this is where they would spend the remainder of their days – subject to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, and subject to worshipping Marduk, the god of the Babylonians.

This was, indeed, their lot in life. For 70 years. And in 70 years a lot of things happened. At least one or two generations of the people of Judah grew old and died. And those who remembered their childhood in Judah aged as well. Meanwhile two, and even three, generations were born in captivity. These descendants were taught the stories of their heritage and heard descriptions of what life was like back home in Jerusalem. But none of them had actually seen it for themselves. All they knew was life in Babylon.

But then something miraculous happened. And that's where we connect with our scripture lesson for this morning from Ezra. What happened is that the Babylonians, who arrogantly thought they were above defeat, were overtaken by the Persians, who became a true world superpower. The Persian Kingdom, which stretched from Eastern Europe and Turkey in the west to India in the east and Egypt in the south, now assumed control of the exiles. They were now subject to a new king – King Cyrus. And it would be easy to assume that this new development would lead the Jewish people to blend into Persian society. But, miraculously, that's not what happened.

After his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus did not use the title “King of Persia” for himself. He didn't need to because the Persians dominated so much of the world. Everybody knew who Cyrus was. Yet, as powerful as Cyrus was, for some reason, he was eager to show the people that “the government is for you.” And so the Persians encouraged subject peoples to worship their own gods/goddesses. Equally as important, as a policy, the Persians generally did not deport and relocate captive peoples.ⁱ They gave captives the opportunity to return to their native lands. And that's just what Cyrus did where our scripture lesson begins in Ezra 1. He decreed that the Jews could return home to Jerusalem and to the land they formerly called home.

The first verse of Ezra 1 is chock full of details about what caused this chain of events:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus so that he sent a herald throughout all the kingdom, and also in a written edict declared...

The first year of King Cyrus wasn't 539 BC when he conquered Babylon and assumed authority over the exiled Jews. Cyrus became king and came to power in 559 BC. Yet, from the point of view of the author, this event inaugurated a new era. This was the first year of the new era that Jeremiah had proclaimed prophetically – that the people would be in captivity for 70 years before God would bring them back to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:21; Jeremiah 29:10; 51:1). All of this took place because God stirred up the heart of

Cyrus. Just as God had twice previously “stirred up” the spirit of foreign kings or nations (Assyria and Babylon) to carry out judgment against Israel (1 Chronicles 5:26; 2 Chronicles 21:16), so here God is at work again. God stirred up Cyrus to enable the survivors – the remnant of Israel living in exile – to return home.

The good news is that they could go home; back to Jerusalem. Yet, not everyone did. Verse 5 says that only those “whose Spirit God had stirred” returned home. It is likely that a majority of the exiles stayed in Babylon. Josephus, one of the church’s earliest scholars, noted that many did not want to exchange what they had acquired in exile for a more uncertain future in the land.ⁱⁱ Yet, if you were to go on to read Ezra Chapter 2, you would find more than 60 verses detailing the list of those who returned.

Regardless of the number of people who chose to return, many had a hand in supporting their journey and restoration aims. King Cyrus himself contributed to the return by restoring to the Jews the temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem. This was one of the tangible signs that they were a legitimate community. Further, in an echo to the Moses-led exodus from Egypt 960 years before, the neighbors also aided the returnees with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts. And leading them back was the little known Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

The trip back to Jerusalem would today take about four hours by airplane. But for the exiles, it took four months. And what they were headed to was a tough environment, much different from the comfortable environment they knew. Yet, just as the most powerful leader of the day, King Cyrus, was stirred to fulfill the prophetic word of God, the exiles saw in the return the providential hand of God. Both in judgment and in grace, the same God had been faithful in both of these actions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps you have already seen some parallels between the story of the exiles and our story today. We, too, have been away from home – away from our worship center. We, too, have received word from a government authority that we can return, and like the

exiles, we are slowly making our way back. We, too, know that not everyone is going to make the journey back – at least not right away. This isn't a matter of faith. It is a matter of personal health condition and safety.

If we are being honest, we, too, recognize that, just like some of the exiles didn't want to leave the comfort of the life they now knew in Babylon, some of you have discovered the “comforts” that come with worshiping from home, and may not want to leave that right away. That's okay, because during our time away, we have found ways to connect each week in worship with people from all over the country. And if we are being honest, what we are heading back to at first will be a tough environment – at least one different from the one we left. Social distancing and good health practices are going to make things look a little different. As we are going to see in part 3 of *The Return*, when the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they had, in today's vernacular, “all the feels” – they experienced the whole range of emotions.

But every good analogy breaks down somewhere. And so does this one. So let's be clear about one thing. Our time away from onsite worship is not some punishment from God. The COVID-19 coronavirus is not God's way of punishing us as people of faith for failing to do something; for failing to live up to our end of the bargain. I know this because, generally speaking, the punishments we find in the Old Testament lasted for many years – long enough for generations who had failed to be in covenant to be succeeded by new generations and a fresh, renewed commitment to following God. But more than that, I know this because of Jesus Christ. I know, and we know, that what Jesus did for each of us assures us that God extends love and grace and mercy even when we fall short. That's what we will recall when we gather around the Lord's Table in just a few moments.

And while the months away haven't been some sort of punishment, they have given us the opportunity to recognize some things – they have opened our eyes to what matters.

This time away has shown us how important our connections to each other are. That's something we won't take that for granted when we are all back together.

This time away has also revealed how important our witness to our community really is. We've seen in recent weeks that many of our neighbors are hungry – hungry for food; hungry for real connection; hungry for something beyond the rat race we found ourselves in. This is a need we've got to continue to meet.

This time away has also allowed us to see how important it is for us to engage with our neighbors. Perhaps we now know the names and needs of the people who live right next to us and around us. Perhaps now we recognize how we can serve them and love them and be in community with them as Christ-followers.

Our time away from our church building has opened our eyes to how technology allows us to reach and be in community with people from an even broader geography than Wichita Falls. The power of the livestream and digital engagement won't go away once we return to the Sanctuary.

But, most of all, what I believe this time away has shown is that the God who has been faithful to us in the past continues to be faithful to us in the present. The same God who stirred in the heart King Cyrus and who stirred the hearts of the exiles is the same God who is stirring our hearts for what lies ahead. This week, make yourself attentive to this stirring. What is God doing in your heart? Because next week, we're going to fast forward past the arrival of the exiles in Jerusalem to see how God stirred Nehemiah's heart...and what he did as a result. But, in the meantime, pay attention. Pay attention to what's going on in your heart. Because it's there that you will find the anticipation for what God's got in store for us next.

ⁱ Brewer, Jeff. *A Concise Background to Ezra/Nehemiah*. May 26, 2018. <https://www.myhopefellowship.org/resources/blog/post/what-you-need-to-know-as-yo>

ⁱⁱ Klein, Ralph W. "Ezra and Nehemiah" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. III*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.