

We are starting a new series entitled *The Return*, where we will work our way through the Old Testament book of Ezra. It is a book fitting for our current moment as it tracks the return of a small remnant of God's people from Exile in Babylon back to the land of Israel. The journey of the return is a story of God's faithfulness to renew and reestablish God's people. It centers on the work of God's faithfulness and sovereignty, reminding us of what is central to our identity as the people of God, and is realistic about the difficulty and opposition we will face in the journey to renewal.

It is a story that asks us to place our focus on God in unprecedented times. And we picked this book for this series because of its connection to our moment of disconnect and our planning for what it means to reestablish ourselves into whatever new normal we as the church are facing.

God's faithfulness is the focus of our journey to renewal.

A bit about the book of Ezra. It is a fascinating and technical work of literature that contains all sorts of connections to the past and what God is doing in the story of God. One of the technical bits that will be important to understand is that Ezra's perspective is not strictly chronological but rather theological. What I mean is that reading the book from start to finish, you will find the story jumps around, but the focus for the author of Ezra is not linear storytelling. It is a theological understanding of who God is and what he has done for his people. And this will take place through three primary rebuilding projects (if you include Nehemiah)—the temple, the community, and the walls of Jerusalem.

Let's jump in. Open your Bibles to Ezra.

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: '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. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and

with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'" Ezra 1:1-4

Here is the thing, the book of Ezra begins assuming that you know a lot about the biblical narrative up until this point in the story. This book is deeply embedded into a much larger narrative. We have to understand what is going on. After having read these first four verses, I hope you are asking questions like: Why are we talking about a pagan king named Cyrus? I've heard of Persia, what is going on there? What does it mean the fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah?

All of these questions should be ringing in your mind right now. This is one of the times that we have to remember and appreciate the sophistication of the Bible as a great work of literature. Because these main topics that have come up in the first verse, "Cyrus," "Words of Jeremiah," etc. should be thought of as hyperlinks to other parts of the Bible. They function similarly to the way links work on a Wikipedia page. They assume you already have a knowledge of the said topic before proceeding.

Therefore, it is imperative that we do a bit of background work on where we are in the story of the scriptures to understand exactly what is going on here. So, here is a brief crash-course about where we are in the biblical narrative, and it is provided by the writer of Ezra.

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia..." (Ezra 1:1). The Kingdom of Israel is divided. Judah is to the south and what remains of Israel to the north. After a checkered story of various kings ruling over Israel, some well and others disastrously, in 587BC Jerusalem is destroyed, and the kingdom falls, while Judah is exiled to Babylon.

Over and over, God had warned, through the ministry of the Prophets, Israel's rebellion and failure to obey the stipulations of the covenant with God would result in Jerusalem being destroyed and Israel overtaken by rival empires. At this particular moment in Israel's history, they are experiencing the Babylonian exile. Babylon conquered the people of God, and they were dragged out of their land and taken to Babylon.

The people were devastated. They were filled with doubt and questioning. How should they understand what had happened to them? Had God sent them into exile, or had the gods of Babylon been victorious? Were they still the chosen people, or

had God abandon them? What had gone wrong? Was God able to deliver them? Was God willing to deliver them?

There is a profound sense that we, as a Big “C” Church, are asking similar questions. We are beginning to recognize the ways in which we have failed. We find ourselves living in a new reality, a reality in which the ground beneath us has shifted. The people of Israel and the people of God have always oscillated between the poles of covenant, failure, and need for renewal. I can only wonder if this is potentially another moment in which we find ourselves in exile

These questions resonate with many of us at a deep level. We experience the disorientation of exile, of our own failure, and the ways that it has train-wrecked our lives. We experience the havoc of a life that has lost its focus—the disillusionment of our sins. For some of us, we feel the weight of exile; we feel distant. Our failures have weighed us down and driven us in ways we never expected. And ultimately, we are feeling this deep disconnect, asking similar questions of despair that the people of Israel are also asking.

However, as we will soon see through the book of Ezra, this death is the means through which God brings about a rebirth. This motif—God entering a covenant with his people, the people failing to hold up their end of the bargain causing a sort of exile, the restoration of the covenant by God’s grace, and the renewal of a new people—is a recurring theme.

Consider that 1000 years prior, Israel found themselves taken to Egypt, where they then emerged into a nation. But now Israel finds themselves in a long dark night in Babylon, but it will mark a new turning point as God’s gracious work of renewal continues. Once a strong kingdom, they entered into exile and what came out was the makings of a new people, a new church.

This is the motif that is at play when we read these opening words of the story of Ezra. The author is trying to get us to see and remember the entire storyline that is loaded into this context. The people of God are exiled from their land, questioning their very relational standing with God.

There is one other element if we are to understand the story of Ezra that is essential to understanding the backdrop of what is going on. And it comes along with the second half of the first sentence. “...in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah...”

It is this point that stands in stark contrast to the functioning narrative in our world today. Currently, we are a culture that is searching for atonement. We get judgment really well; we understand the failures of so many and the absolutely necessary means of challenging injustice. But we are a culture that has no context of grace. We understand the need for exile, we understand the need for judgment. But without any form for atonement or divine grace, we are left with nihilism.

This is the profound contribution of the biblical narrative to our world—the profound contribution of the Prophets. Is that we face judgment, but we also face immense grace.

This is a far more nuanced conversation than we have the space for today, but we must understand the ability to judge, condemn evil, and injustice, but afford a way of redemption that does not diminish the responsibility and devastating effects of injustice.

Divine Grace as a disruption to our understanding of the world.

We need the prophets. We need those who speak against our failures desperately. This is another “hyperlink” to a part of the story. So, the first part of the story is the context of exile, and the second is “in order to fulfill the word of the Lord to Jeremiah.” Well, the natural question is, what was the word of the Lord to Jeremiah?

I’ve already mentioned a few times that the work of the prophets was to call judgment and warning on the people of God and how they had gone astray. But the role of Jeremiah was two-fold.

First, as mentioned, he warns of impending failure of the people of God and the consequences to ensue, but this is not the role in its entirety. It is also to build up and point toward hope. Listen to the way the book of Jeremiah describes his vocation. “See, today I will appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). The vocation and calling of Jeremiah was to call out the injustice and judgment on God’s people for straying from their calling and also to lay out the hope of God’s faithfulness to the covenant.

Judgment and Hope, Destructive and Constructive.

What the prophet understands is that when we veer our focus away from God’s intention. When we decenter God as the organizing principle of our lives, our lives become cathedrals of error. And the implications of this for Israel was disastrous for the vulnerable around them. They became complicit in evil; they perpetuated idolatry; they replaced God as their center and moved other’s Gods to the center. The work of exile is God working through circumstances to destroy that which we have wrongly built, in order to construct a new people, once again. He did this with the Exodus, he did this with the Babylonian Exile, and he will do this again for us as the people of God.

So what is this hope that Jeremiah laid out in response to the destruction? What is the writer of Ezra doing and starting to work on that is going to fulfill the work of Jeremiah? This hope was connected to a much larger motif of the prophetic hope of the Old Testament. But the specific words of Jeremiah were that the Babylonian exile would end.

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jer. 29:10-11

Covenant hope was not over; God preserved a remnant and was going to bring them back to the land. And this animates the prophetic hope that was spoken of long ago pointing toward the Messianic reign. The time when the Kingdom of God would be established by the Messiah and the Kingdom of God would come.

They will return and rebuild. This is what is meant by the first two verses of the book of Ezra. The author is centering the faithfulness of God as the foundation for the story we are about to read, in which God is ushering in a new thing. The people have been forgiven, and a remnant is returning. All of this is part of the prophetic story of hope that the Kingdom of God would come. Bible commentator Mark Throntveit stated:

Thus, these few verses proclaim nothing less than the announcement of God's gracious activity... They summon the restoration community to regard themselves as Israel reborn, recalled from the grave of doubt and despair to walk in the newness of this latest recreation of God's people. God had not forgotten them. God had not been defeated by the gods of Babylon. God had been faithful to the promises all along. Even in the chastisement of the people during the seventy years of exile, divine grace is attested in God's refusal to give them over to death. God was with them, in their midst, and at their head, leading them on to a second chance.

Now, with all of that in mind, Ezra and Nehemiah become a sort of cliff-hanger, as we wait and see if this is the moment in which God is bringing about the Messianic age. Will the people of God finally live up to the stipulations of the covenant? And so what begins is a journey toward renewal. It is imperative that as we begin this journey, our task is to focus the whole of who we are on God, for it is God who is bringing about this renewal.

God's faithfulness is the focus of our journey to renewal.

This is the journey of return. It is the journey from exile, from despair, and disconnect from God to a journey of renewal for ourselves. It is God's perpetual faithfulness to his covenant promise. What does this journey of return look like? How did the people of God go on this journey, and how do we go on this return journey?

Ezra lays out three distinctives in the first two chapters of what this journey looks like: The journey begins; the journey is an invitation; the journey is a hope in process.

The Journey Begins

It seems simple enough, but pay particular attention to the way Ezra details this beginning. "...the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus

king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing..." (Ezra 1:1b). Now, God is up to something new here. The idea of God moving in the heart of people is not new to Ezra. In the past, God has frequently made use of foreign nations through the agency of their kings. But those times had always been to chastise Israel. The nations were the means through which God had often levied punishment (Isaiah 5.26-30; 7.18-19; 10.5). God's sovereignty extends to even working with pagan kings. Their motives were selfish and primarily political, but God still used them.

If you turn back one page in your Bible, you will see a case of this. 2 Chronicles 36:17, "He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians..." This is part of the story that Israel was living now. God had used the agency of the Babylonians and their conquering of Jerusalem as punishment.

However, this time around, it is something new, not for the purpose of punishment but an act of divine grace. It is the initiation of the movement toward the redemption of Israel. God is using King Cyrus of the Persian empire to begin something new.

A few things of note, the move by Cyrus was not a stroke of altruism. Rather, it was a politically motivated move. Where the Babylonians had sought to crush every rebellion that challenged their reign as an attempt to solidify their position of power, Cyrus and the Persians felt that it was a better policy move to allow the conquered people a measure of self-determination and religious autonomy in the hope this approach would instill feelings of loyalty. It was political maneuvering for his own ends. But nevertheless, God uses this moment as the beginning.

It can be so easy for us to assume that we are the ones that initiate the move toward return. But we should never confuse or assume that we can do this move on our own, rather it is God who is doing the initiating. This does not always mean that God has orchestrated and made certain circumstances happen. Israel is in the exile because of their own agency, their own failure, and their own patterns of failure and sin. And yet, God is there working.

The journey begins with the movement of God.

And so this stirring of Cyrus' heart moves him to release an edict declaring that all who desire can return to Jerusalem. But it is not only Cyrus' heart that is being moved, look a little further down at verse 5.

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites - everyone whose heart God had moved - prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:5).

The faithful response to the edict was made by those who felt the stirring of God. They had been moved by the Spirit, by the initiating of God that the journey of renewal was beginning. It can be so easy to read into these stories the vengeance of God,

but we have to remember this point. The Journey begins with an act of God's divine grace. It is God who is stirring in the hearts of his people, offering them the beginning of a new journey. It is the grace of God that turns our hearts toward renewal. Without this movement of God's grace, we are left in exile.

The Journey Begins

How is God stirring you toward your journey of return? Where have you experienced the movement of divine grace that is inviting you on the journey? The journey is initiated by God, but this initiation is not always met with a positive response. It is an invitation, which can be rejected.

The Journey is an Invitation

As we read on in the story, we see it is an invitation to step into this journey of renewal. The eclectic group that responds to the move indicates that all are invited. As you read through the census in chapter 2, you see priests, Levites, musicians, servants, builders, young, old, nobles, and peasants. The invitation is not a move of the elites but is a flattening of social hierarchy to include all.

This edict for the possible return was communicated broadly. And without question, it is God who has done the initiating, but there is still human agency in the response to such a move. The response was not received by all in Babylon. Many had adjusted and settled into life in Mesopotamia. They had grown complacent and comfortable in their new surroundings. Therefore, they were unwilling to pull up stakes and return to the impoverished conditions of Palestine at the time. There was a long and arduous journey ahead of them. One that would require discomfort, uprooting their lives, and reorienting their focus toward God.

And this is what we see a remnant of Israel do. Their faithful response to the stirring of God serves as a reminder that there is no redemption without regeneration, and that God can and will continue to work with what is available.

God is present and inviting us toward something new. You may feel the weight of exile and the burden of separation, but God is faithful and will continue to walk along with us toward renewal.

The Journey is an Invitation

How are you responding to the invitation? Are you complacent in the status quo? Where is God inviting you to uproot and move toward return? Lastly, as we will see through the story of Ezra, the return is a process we still find ourselves in. The book actually

ends fairly anticlimactic, where the people of God continue to struggle.

The Journey is a Hope in Process

One of the primary allusions of this text is that it is portrayed as a new Exodus. *"Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles..." (Ezra 2:1)*. They are still under the jurisdiction of the Persian Empire. The Messianic age had not yet started; the Kingdom of God was not fully consummated. And the temptation still remains to lose focus and drift from God. For Israel, the temptation would be to turn to find their hope in nationalism to whatever empire they found themselves in. In the same way, the temptation for us is to equate the Kingdom of God to some sort of American Nationalism.

But the task ahead of Ezra, in particular, was the reconstitution of the people of God within the political structures of the Persian Empire. And too, the task for us is the reconstitution of God's people within the political structures of America. How do we maintain our faithfulness as a distinct and alternative community? A community that is called out from among the nations and is separate, refusing to conflate the kingdom of America with the Kingdom of God.

But this new Exodus also means liberation. It is liberation from our sin; it is a forgiveness and freedom from our old ways that drove us into exile. It is a welcoming to a new reality and a new way of being human. Yes, we live as strangers to this space, but strangers that are longing and working to bring about its renewal. Therefore, this journey is ultimately pointed toward Jesus. The central hope in which we are longing and waiting for, which the Prophets spoke of—the hope of the beginning of the messianic age as started by Jesus.

The Journey is a Hope in Process: Where have you placed your hope? Where have you shifted your focus?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews 12:1-2

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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