

We continue our series called The Return. So far, we have learned that the first half of the Book of Ezra is about the return of Jewish exiles to their home in Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. We have learned about a rebuilding project. First, they rebuilt their altar, and then they started work on rebuilding their temple. We learned that what this is all about is the restoration of God's people as a worshipping community.

We learned that Cyrus, the king of Persia, had defeated the Babylonians, which made the Persian Empire the most powerful empire in the world. Then we learned that Cyrus received a word from the Lord that he was to help the Jewish exiles return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. The return came with ups and downs. While they got lots of help from Cyrus, they also got lots of opposition from the local people around Jerusalem.

We pick up the story in Ezra chapter six, with King Cyrus no longer the ruler. A king named Darius is now in charge of Persia. If you read chapter six, you will see a consistent theme throughout. After years of struggle and perseverance, the temple will finally be completed. Chapter six tells us that this return home meant a return to joy.

And God is telling us that joy should accompany our lives no matter what home looks like right now. Whether our home looks the same or not, or whether things have returned to normal or not, or whether things have changed forever in our life, joy is to be part of our Christian life. In chapter six, we see four reasons why we can return to joy no matter the status of our home.

So let's talk about joy for a moment. When was the last time you sensed the feeling of joy in your life? Can you remember? Was it today? Yesterday? Was it pre-COVID? Was it 2014 because 2014 was the last time the Giants won the World Series?

What is the definition of joy? A definition is hard to pin down. The English word refers to "a condition or feeling of great pleasure or happiness." Pleasure has to do with sensation. Such as the sensation that comes with that first sip of coffee in the morning, or a sensation can come through a runner's high, or through a tender kiss. And happiness kind of describes it as well, but still falls short. Happiness has to do with circumstances. It's a sunny day, so I'm happy. I got a raise this week, my team won the game, so I am happy. There is a deeper meaning around joy in the Bible.

The Greek word most often translated as joy adds the nuance of an "inner quality of well-being." So a true state of joy isn't

dictated by one's positive or negative circumstances. The psalmists tell us to rejoice no matter the state of our finances, our social status, our level in our company, our job security, or the status of our health.

We can choose or not choose to be joyful. In good circumstances, we, of course, choose joy. Jesus tells us to rejoice that our names are recorded in heaven. In tough circumstances, we should choose joy. Jesus looked at his own circumstances and said, "For the joy set before me, I will endure the cross." And He told his disciples that he had taught them things so that their joy may be made full.

Paul, while suffering in a Philippian jail, basically commanded us to: "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say again: Rejoice!*" (Phil. 4:4). Paul chose to be joyful despite his circumstances.

We can't manufacture our own joy. Joy flows. It springs from somewhere and flows into our lives through some relational channel. A good way to look at it is to think of a light bulb. A light bulb has all the necessary wiring to light up, but the bulb has to be connected to some external source of power to produce light. In the same way, we have all the necessary wiring to express joy. We choose to be joyful when we let God fill us with his joy. So through our relationship with God, we gain the right perspective on true joy.

What are joy inhibitors? I don't think any of us have trouble coming up with a list. A shortlist during COVID-19 can include fear of our unknown future, the brokenness in our country, or the grief over lost loved ones. It could be the pain many of us feel from loneliness and isolation. Maybe it's that feeling of being overwhelmed while trying to manage life for you and your family right now. Pick your own biggest joy inhibitor.

It's the anxiety we feel that comes from being separated from people we love. This week I learned that my best friend's wife is in the hospital with COVID and viral pneumonia. My friend can't go see his wife. He is separated. It's painful. It's unnatural. It's a struggle for him to come home to joy.

I pray that Ezra chapter 6 will be an opportunity to return us home to joy. Our big idea is that it is God's aim to return us to great joy in Him and His sovereign ways

Our passage shows us four ways we can return home to joy. So the year is 522 BC. It's about 15 years since the altar was rebuilt.

The Israelites had faced years of opposition since. Now, Darius was on the throne.

King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it, Ezra 6:1-2

Darius wanted to know what Cyrus had commanded regarding the rebuilding. So he issued a decree to search the archives. Nothing was found at Babylon, but a scroll was found in a palace in Ecbatana, which had been Cyrus' summer palace in modern-day Iran. It was up in the mountains about 5000 feet, a place to go to get a break from the summer heat. They found it. God kept this record safe to be revealed when needed years later.

Memorandum:

In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. (vv. 3-4)

The dimensions laid out would make this rebuilt temple even larger than Solomon's temple. And we know now that this temple would last 563 years until its destruction by the Roman Emperor Titus in AD 70. And the Jews didn't even have to pay for their temple. It was to be paid for by the Persian treasury.

Why did Cyrus and then Darius allow this? I think that both Persian kings wanted to humiliate the Babylonians by restoring everything that the Babylonians had destroyed when they were in power. We should know that both Cyrus and Darius were religious people, and they wanted to be in good stead with every god represented in their empire.

But there was a third more important reason. God wanted the Jews to see that He was behind all of this. He wanted his people to see his hand working out His will all around them. Remember, this started when God spoke to Cyrus. And the temple construction continued with stones and timbers. God allowed all the gold and silver looted by Babylon to be returned. Look at verses 5.

Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God. v. 5

Then Cyrus declared that all the local civil authorities were to stay out of their way.

Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the

governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. vv. 1-7

Cyrus goes on to say, provide whatever they need, anything the priests require, animals, oil, wheat, wine, anything they need to offer sacrifices. And if anyone messes with this project, here is what will happen.

Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence. vv. 11-12

The remarkable thing here for these Jews and for us today is there is evidence that God is guiding all things toward his outcome and our good. And that should empower us with joy no matter how tough our current circumstances are. Remember, they had 70 years in exile and then 14 more years where construction was held up. But God's hand was on them, and God was working and guiding all things toward his outcome and our good.

It's so important for each of us to look at Ezra 6 and then look at our own lives and see God's hand throughout both. When we see God work in the Scriptures or in our lives, we should be filled with joy.

Return Home to the Joy of God's Providential Care

I love the example of the Apostle John. He was filled with joy. John had experienced God's providential care first hand. He had seen God work all around him. He had heard Jesus speak, and he had touched Jesus in the flesh.

In 1 John 1:1, John said,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

Then in verse 4, John says, "*We write this to make our joy complete.*"

John is saying, we return home to joy when we experience the presence of Jesus and see His work. We experience Jesus when we read his word, and when we pray. We experience Jesus when we see a broken life restored. We experience Jesus when we see the Holy Spirit working in people and working through their circumstances to accomplish His will on earth and in heaven.

One summer, when our kids were in middle school, we took a summer vacation trip to experience, to see, hear, and touch Yellowstone National Park. On the way, we decided to take a detour to see, hear, and touch Mt. Rushmore. The day before we entered Rushmore, I had a conversation with the clerk at our hotel. I asked him what else there is to see around Rushmore. He

recommended we go see a statue of Crazy Horse, the famous Native American warrior. We only had one day, so we hurried off. Our first stop was Crazy Horse. That's when we first recognized we were in trouble.

It was the week of the annual Motorcycle Rally in Sturgis, South Dakota. The roads were packed with bikers—thousands of them. We had our minivan. We inched up the road toward the Crazy Horse Memorial and made our way in. We quickly got behind schedule. At one point, I turned to the girls and said, "Come on kids, let's get in the van, so we have time to see Mt. Rushmore. So carefully dodging bikers, we inched down the road toward Rushmore. It was late afternoon by the time we got to the turnoff, and the line to get in was miles long.

There was no way. We were out of time. So I made a quick decision. I got to the long stoplight, I turned around and said, "Julie, you and the kids get out of the car now, and run over to that side of the highway. I think you can get a picture of Rushmore. I'll wait here until the light changes." I did what any good dad would do. "Now hurry kids. We got a schedule, and you may never get back to Mt. Rushmore again in your life."

They ran and snapped a picture. Looking at their picture later that night, I saw my girls frowning because, in the background, they could only see one president. Actually, it was half of Teddy Roosevelt's face. We sort of saw Rushmore, but we didn't experience it. I think many of us sort of see Jesus, but we don't experience him. We don't take the time to see, hear, and touch his handiwork around us.

There is evidence of God's providential care all around us if we choose to experience it, and that should fill us with joy. Take that step and stop kind of seeing Jesus. Instead, experience Jesus. You will see his hand working in your life and through your circumstances.

Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence. So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. vv. 13-15

When we are confused, hurt, angry, and depressed about our circumstances, when we are losing hope, God gives us a joy booster shot here in these verses. When we feel like we cannot hold out any longer, we need to return home to the joy of knowing that what God has begun, he will complete. Your life may look like a half-built life, surrounded by a lot of old rubble. If this describes

you, choose joy because God is reminding us that He promised to complete what he has started in you.

Return Home to the Joy of God's Certain Completion

Listen to the words of Paul. Notice his joy. And know his circumstances. He was locked in jail when he gave us these words.

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:4-6

So be filled with joy, because God is working in you and around you. And be filled with joy because your tough circumstances won't defeat you in the end. God has promised that He will complete the work he has begun in you.

Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. For the dedication of this house of God they offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses. vv. 16-18

They dedicated their completed temple in 516 BC. Remember, there hadn't been a sacrifice in their temple in 70 years. Imagine the joy! It was time to celebrate. One of the things that that sticks out to me is the connection I see between joy and the service of God. It tells me that we can be filled with joy when we live life right by serving God. So let's return home.

Return Home to the Joy of Dedicated Service to God

God by nature, is the most joyful being in the universe. And he finds great joy when his people serve him. God is present with those who serve him, and God is in hearts that are set apart for service.

For those of you who key in on service both inside the walls of our church and outside the walls of our church, you know what I'm talking about. You know that you could not do what he has called you to do on your own. You need Him working through you. And when that happens, you experience joy. And not only that, God also experiences joy.

I didn't understand this until I had kids. One of the things I loved doing with my oldest, Katie, when she was about three years old, was gardening. We would go out to the garden together and scratch in the dirt and plant our seeds.

We got her one of those miniature orange aprons from Home Depot, and I got her a little plastic shovel and rake set that fit

in her apron pockets. We gardened. We weeded. We watched things grow. We ate our veggies.

I know she had fun working with me, and to this day she still gardens. But as joyful as this three year was feeling, her dad was feeling even more joyful. I was able to work with my daughter on a project we both cared about.

That's the point of the joy of dedicated service. When I put on my little apron, grab my little plastic tools, grab my heavenly father's hand, and head out to serve, I go with the one who has a big apron and large earth-moving tools. We work together with his tools, making all the difference, while yet I get credit. And the joy I feel serving God is no comparison to the joy He feels having me serve under him.

We see throughout Scripture that God uses kings who serve God, priests who serve God, and little nobodies like me who serve God. And kings, priests, and nobodies can experience joy. God gets even more joy leading you in your service as he did Ezra's. It's a beautiful and humbling picture.

On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover. The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their relatives the priests and for themselves. vv. 19-20

With all the chaos around them, when the exiles had the opportunity, what did they do? They celebrated Passover. They returned to what truly gave them joy. They worshipped the one true God. Think about how special and joyful this was to them. Remember, their ancestors were enslaved before the Babylonians. Remember, they were enslaved by the Egyptians for 400 years. And it was after that first Passover that God set them free from the bondage in Egypt, and allowed them Return Home to the land God had promised them. And they were returning home with joy.

So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel. v. 21

Together they worshipped. Can you remember what it was like to worship together? To hear other voices singing praises around you? To greet others? To share a cup of coffee together, let alone share a meal? To literally see each other with unveiled faces?

For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel. v. 22

We end today without full closure. And I think it's a great metaphor for the Christian life.

Return Home to the Joy of Worshipping the One True God

Could it be that we are still waiting to return from our exile to experience this? I was talking to one of our pastors this week. And this pastor was talking to another lady about looking forward to when we could meet together again. And that brief conversation caused this lady to just burst into tears. I understand that! We were made to worship together.

But we are not there yet. We are called right now to wait. But not to wait in sorrow and defeat. But to wait with joy because we know God's providential care is all around us. Wait with joy because we know He will complete what he has begun. Wait with joy, knowing that we can bring God joy by serving him right now.

So be encouraged, joy is available right now. Be encouraged because there is evidence of his working in our small groups, with our children and students, in marriages, and in renewed priorities. Revived lives. Look for it. There is joy all around you.

The Westminster Catechism of 1647 says, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

We are hardwired for joy. So tap into the power source and be lit up with joy.

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

© 2020 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1449-4FC