

“Going Home”
Ezra 1-2
May 31, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

With the new sermon series we are beginning today, we are wading into a part of the Bible that is an unfamiliar and jumbled mass of confusion for many. Sandra Richter says that for those who lack familiarity with the Old Testament, it is like a dysfunctional closet. Perhaps you have one of those in your house. It's that closet with piles of disorganized clothes, shoes, incoming mail that we intend to get to at some point but don't want to deal with now, and any number of things too valuable to throw away but for which there is not a settled place. For many, the Old Testament is like that, just a pile of stories with no structure to it.

So we need to see what structure the Bible gives to itself, and I find it expressed clearly in this idea of home. From beginning to end, the Bible is about God making a home with his human image bearers. The Garden of Eden was the original home for our race, a delightful place because of God's presence there and the beauty he had created within it. The book of Ezekiel refers to Eden as “the garden of God” (28:13; 31:9). And it was our home until the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God's rule and reign. Deep in the heart of us all is a longing for Eden, because that is the home for which we were created. Though our home was lost, God did not give up on bringing our sinful race back to that home. The rest of the Bible is about God's work to bring his people home again. He began with one man, Abraham, and made of him a nation where God would once again dwell with his people. He gave them a land and put his temple within that land. But once again, his people rebelled against his rule and reign, and God kicked them off his land by sending them into exile to the nation of Babylon. That's where Ezra picks up the story. It is now time for God to bring his people back to Jerusalem, and Ezra and Nehemiah speak of God's work to do so.

I. Going Home Is Impossible Apart from God

Israel was far from home, living in exile in Babylon. Their situation looked hopeless. Things had come to this sad state because of the rebellion and idolatry of the nation over many centuries. Israel's best years were during the reigns of the great King David and the early part of his son's reign, King Solomon. But in his latter years, Solomon began to embrace the false gods of the nations around Israel, a pattern that worsened after his death. Solomon's son could not keep the kingdom unified, and it split into a northern and southern kingdom. The northern kingdom, consisting of ten of the twelve

tribes, had nothing but evil, idolatrous kings. Not a one of them did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. The tragic result was their captivity by the powerful and ruthless Assyrians in 722 BC. The southern kingdom, consisting of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, had a mix of good kings and bad kings. But they also turned away from the Lord so significantly that God's judgment came in the form of the Babylonian army laying siege to Jerusalem, leading to its downfall and destruction in 586 BC. The temple was destroyed and thousands of Judah's citizens were forcibly marched to Babylon, a journey that would have taken several months. The last king of Judah was Zedekiah. Just before the city fell to the Babylonians, he and his sons escaped. But they were soon caught by the Babylonians and taken to King Nebuchadnezzar's western headquarters in Riblah in Syria. There Zedekiah was made to witness the execution of his two sons, after which his eyes were gouged out of his head. So the cruel execution of his sons was the last thing he saw. He was then marched off in chains to Babylon, never to be heard from again. The Jews even lost their language, Hebrew. We know that because later in the book when Ezra will read to them the law of God in Hebrew, a translator was required. Their native language now was Aramaic, which was also the language spoken by Israel in the New Testament.

So Israel lost its land, its king, its language and its most prized feature, its temple. It would seem that Judah was done as a nation. But it was kept alive in the hearts of its people, even though they were far away in Babylon. Psalm 137 captures it well. **“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”** (v. 1-4). There was a longing for home that no army could remove, though it seemed that the longing would go forever unmet.

Have you ever had a strong experience of nostalgia? I remember a time about fifteen years ago when I drove by the baseball fields where our son had played when he was around eight and nine years of age. We were living in Maryland at the time, and I was the coach of his team. About ten years after that, and about the time when Matthew was leaving for college, I was driving through that community on my way to attend a board meeting. As I drove by those fields, I was overcome by a powerful feeling of nostalgia. There was a longing for a time past that would never be recaptured. It was bittersweet, because the memories were good ones, but at the same time there was a sense of loss.

I believe such experiences of nostalgia are reminders of Eden. We are all built for a home of beauty, shared with God, the one who is the source of all beauty. Deep in the human psyche is this sense that we were made for something wonderful, but something which has been lost forever. Ezra points to the truth that it would be lost forever but for the tenacious and powerful will

of God. He will see to it that we get back to this home that we all long for. That brings us to our next point.

II. Going Home by the Hand of a Sovereign God

Though a return to Jerusalem looked impossible from a human standpoint, the calculation changes when God weighs in. God had spoken through his prophet Jeremiah that the Babylonian exile would last seventy years. This prophecy was contained in a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the exiles while he himself remained in Jerusalem. **“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope”** (Jer. 29:10-11).

God was mindful of his promise, and he acts to fulfill it during the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. We know from other ancient sources that this was the year 538 B.C. How did we get from Babylon to Persia? Daniel 5 tells the story of the fall of Babylon in the story of Belshazzar’s feast. Belshazzar was the last of Babylon’s kings, and at this great feast he hosted, a hand appeared that wrote some mysterious words on a wall. No one knew what the words meant, so Daniel was summoned to interpret them. The words mean that God has numbered the days of Belshazzar’s kingdom and brought them to an end. Belshazzar has been weighed and found wanting, and his kingdom has been given to the Medes and Persians. That very night Belshazzar was killed and the words fulfilled.

Our text tells us that **“the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.”** As a result, he issued the decree of verses 2-4. The essence of the decree is at its beginning: **“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, which is in Judah.”** Does this mean that Cyrus was a believer in Israel’s God? Not at all. Ancient documents from this period make it clear that Cyrus worshiped a god named “Ahura-Mazda.” But Cyrus was a different ruler than the superpowers before him, Assyria and Babylon. He believed that the best way to maintain peace within his realm was to allow each nation to keep their individual gods and culture. When he captured Babylon, it is reported that he grasped the hands of the statue of the Babylonian god, Marduk, and announced that he would allow the Babylonians to continue worshiping their god. Contrast this with what Nebuchadnezzar did when he captured Jerusalem. He made it a point to destroy the temple and to remove all its utensils and take them to Babylon. Those utensils were then placed in the temple of the Babylonian god as a symbol of that god’s conquest of Israel’s God. So part of Cyrus’ decree was to restore all those utensils to the Jews as they returned to Jerusalem.

What explains Cyrus' perspective? It is the sovereign hand of God at work. The book of Proverbs says that **"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will"** (21:1). God had given Cyrus his power and God had moved in his heart to be motivated to restore Israel's people to their land and to the worship of their God. There are no overt miracles involved, just the quiet work of God in the heart of a pagan king.

God also worked in the hearts of his people. In response to Cyrus' decree, the hearts of the Jews were also stirred up to go and rebuild the city and its temple. Remember that some of these exiles had been in Babylon for close to seventy years. The newest arrivals had been there for almost fifty years. Imagine you and your family have lived somewhere since 1970, plenty of time to get fully settled in. Children and grandchildren have been born to you, businesses established and routines developed. And then you are invited to undertake a difficult and long journey, turning your back on a place you had lived for decades. But the God who stirred the heart of Cyrus also stirred the hearts of his people, giving them a strong desire to return to Jerusalem.

One of the applications we can learn from this is the need to pay attention to our desires. God will often lead us through stirring up our desires, whether it's the desire to do something or the desire not to do something. So honesty about our desires is an important part of discerning God's will for us.

III. Going Home to a Same but Different Place

Chapter two of our book is one of those chapters we easily skip over. Its 71 verses list over 125 names, almost all of which are unfamiliar to us. The Bible claims that all Scripture is profitable to us, so what's the profit of this chapter with its tedious list of strange names? Every list of names in the Bible teaches at the very least that God is interested in individuals, men and women with names. But there is often more, and that is the case here. If we look carefully, we will see in this chapter a pattern emerge that emphasizes continuity with Israel's past, with the time before the exile. For example, the names listed are not the names of those who actually returned from exile, but their ancestors. The returning exiles are described as "the sons of" various individuals. The names given are the names of those who would have lived in the land before the exile. And now their ancestors would be returning to the very same plots of land owned by these forefathers.

There's one more indication of this continuity that we find in this chapter. The names are divided between those who can prove their descent from pre-exilic Israel and those who cannot. This was not motivated by some desire for racial purity, but to emphasize once more continuity with the past.

So why is there an emphasis on such continuity? It relates to the power of God to take us home again. Have you ever had that experience of going back to a childhood home and finding it very different from what you remembered? A few years ago, our daughter had a summer internship in Indianapolis, where I had lived for a year when I was in fourth grade. We planned a visit to see her, and I was excited at the prospect of seeing my home of so many years ago. It would be an opportunity to share some memories of my childhood with Wendy and Kathryn. Imagine my disappointment, then, when I discovered that the church down the street had purchased our house and the three between us and turned all four into a parking lot. Our beautiful house was gone, never to be seen again.

I wonder how many of the returning exiles had a similar experience. Most had been born in Babylon and knew about Jerusalem only from the stories told by their parents. What must they have thought at their first glimpse of Jerusalem and its temple? Most of it was little more than a pile of rubble. The temple had been torn down, as had the walls of the city. It had the feel of poverty and neglect. What they needed to hear was that God was able to restore this as a home to them. But what would that home be like? We know from history that Israel would be ruled for the next five hundred years by an assortment of foreign powers, except for a brief period during the second century B.C. After Persia would come Greece and Rome. The second temple would not come close to the glorious temple during the days of Solomon. And then it too would be destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans. But before that happened, Jesus came claiming to be the true temple. A temple is the place where God meets with his people. The message is clear. Jesus is our true home. God is able to restore to his people their home, but that home is found in Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

We are all exiles from Eden, on pilgrimage to our home. And what is that home? It is the place where God is. He is our home, and we will never be at home until our hearts rest in him. We are now on the difficult journey to that home. We're going home. No matter how bleak things may look, we are sure to get there because God has promised to get us there. Once more, we will live in the garden of God, brought safely there by the blood of the new temple, our Lord Jesus. How would your life change if you believed that right now? It would fill us with hope, with confidence, with a sense of meaning in our lives.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Ezra 1-2

1. Have you ever had a strong feeling of nostalgia that you would be willing to share with others?
2. Man's first home was with God in the Garden of Eden. Taking what you know from Genesis 1-3, what was that home like?
3. Someone has said that we are all homesick for Eden. If you were accumulating evidence to support that statement, what would you say? How might this help us in our witness to unbelievers?
4. God stirred the heart of Cyrus to issue this decree allowing the exiles to return to Jerusalem. He also stirred the hearts of his people to want to return. What applications come to mind when you think of God's sovereignty, which is taught here? Is there any comfort this brings?
5. God stirred in the hearts of Cyrus and his people, which speaks of God putting a desire within them. God often leads his people through their desires. Have you had any experience of that? How has God led you through the desires he has put within you?
6. This text teaches us that our ultimate home is with God, and all other attempts to find our home elsewhere will not satisfy. In what ways do we try to make our home something other than God?
7. If you have the time and technical ability, consider listening to a performance of the song "Going Home," with music by Dvorak and lyrics by William Fisher. Here's the YouTube link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvThHk-wMRk>
Here are the words: "Going home, going home, I am going home. Quiet like, some still day, I am going home. It's not far, just close by, through an open door. Work all done, care laid by, never fear no more. Mother's there expecting me, Father's waiting too. Lots of faces gathered there, all the friends I knew. I'm just going home. No more fear, no more pain, no more stumbling by the way. No more longing for the day, going to run no more. Morning star light the way, restless dreams all gone. Shadows gone, break of day, real life has begun."
What stirs in your heart as you listen?