



Parkway Fellowship

THE JOURNEY BACK • THE CHANCE TO RETURN • EZRA 1:1-4; 2:68-69; 3:1-3 • 5/17/2020

MAIN POINT

It is tempting, especially in times of isolation, to get away from spiritual practices that help us join God on mission in the world. When that happens,, God wants us to return in newfound commitment.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is a place you've visited that you'd return to if you could?

What is a place you can't wait to return to once the pandemic ends?

What is a place you've been to that you never want to return to? Why?

This week we're beginning a new series that will take a look at the Israelites journey back to Israel after exile in Babylon. What they did and what God taught them will help us know what to do and what God wants to teach us.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ EZRA 1:1-4.

What drove the people of God to go in these verses?

What are we missing if we believe mission is only for a select group of specially called people, instead of the church's collective responsibility?

Ezra and the other exiles were going back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of the Lord, which the Babylonians had destroyed. We may quickly pass over this event in Scripture, but the faith

required to go and the amount of work involved were significant. Similarly, God will call you to go. It might be down the hall or across the street, it might be around the world. All that's required of us is to be faithful to respond to God's urging and go where He calls. God is able to take our ordinary faithfulness and do more with it than we could ever ask or imagine. We never know what God is going to do.

In this week's message, we were exhorted, "Don't stay in Babylon!" What can you relate to your own personal "Babylon" (i.e. a certain sin, habit you've developed during the quarantine, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness)? Why would it be tempted for you to stay in that place?

What would it look like for you to leave Babylon and journey back to the place where God wants you to be?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 2:68-69, 3:1-3.

Disciples live for the glory of God in the world. They see their resources as belonging to God, and they see themselves as His stewards. They serve God's mission as they give and go.

What makes community and unity so important when tackling group projects? How does worshipping God together unify people?

What conclusions can we make about the Jews' repentance and worship by observing their obedience of Mosaic law? How can obedience motivate a believer to give out of pure gratitude to God?

Verse 3 says, "Despite their fears..." What fears will we have to overcome to leave "Babylon" and journey back to the place God wants us to be?

The people rebuilt the altar for worship and pursued a right relationship with God through worship. Restoration with God cannot exclude worship. Indeed, it is the essence of what it means to be restored to Him.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What will it take for you not to "stay in Babylon"?

Which of these do you need to start doing: give, build, sacrifice?

What spiritual habit do you need to return to?

How can this group help you leave Babylon and return to God's kingdom purposes in the days ahead?

PRAYER

Thank God for His Word. Thank Him for His enduring love and mercy, leading you out of exile and back to Him. Ask Him to show you how you can give, build, and sacrifice for His mission and glory in the world.

COMMENTARY

| EZRA 1:1-4

1:1. The first year of Cyrus refers to the first year of his rule over Babylonia (538 b.c.) and not the first year of his reign in Persia that began in 559 b.c. and continued until 530 b.c. Spoken through Jeremiah may allude to Jeremiah's prophecy of the 70 years of captivity (Jer 29:10-14). More likely it is a reference to Jer 51:11, "The Lord has put it into the mind of the kings of the Medes." The same vocabulary occurs here in Ezr 1:1 where the Lord put it into the mind (lit "stirred up the spirit"; cp. Jer 51:1) of King Cyrus.

1:2-3. The "proclamation" (v. 1), often referred to as the "Edict of Cyrus," reflects Cyrus's policy to allow the exiles to return to their homeland. The edict, from the closing words of 2 Chronicles (2Ch 36:23), appears in two versions in the book of Ezra: here in Hebrew, reflecting a strong Jewish perspective, and in 6:3-5 written in Aramaic (the language of diplomacy in the Persian Empire), which appears to be an official court memorandum. Some scholars question whether a Persian king would refer to God as The Lord, the God of heaven. Possibly this reflects a paraphrase provided by the Jewish leaders in Babylon. One of Cyrus's tasks was to build a house at Jerusalem in Judah. House often refers to the temple, the house of the Lord. The Babylonians had destroyed Solomon's temple in 586 b.c.

1:4. It is not clear if the men of that region refer to Jewish men or the entire population. If it refers to all the people, there may be a parallel here to the "spoiling of the Egyptians" (Ex 3; 11; 12). As the birth of the nation began with the spoils of the Gentiles, so the new beginning of God's people began with the silver and gold of their former oppressors.

| EZRA 3:1-3

3:1 The designation seventh month was important in that the month featured special observances God had established for repentance and remembrance. The first day of the month came to be recognized as something of a “New Year’s Day” (modern Rosh Hashanah). The sacred assembly on this day was later associated with the Feast of Trumpets; it was a preparation for the tenth day with its solemn observance of the Day of Atonement (modern Yom Kippur). Then on the fifteenth day the Festival of Booths—also known as the Feast of Tabernacles—began and continued for seven days (see Lev. 23:33-44). On the first day and then again on the final day, the people gathered in solemn assembly (see Lev. 23:35,36). The people recognized the need to repent of the sinfulness that had led to their exile.

3:2-3 Rebuilding the altar became the priority for reestablishing their worship. The law called for sacrifices and offerings, and these required an altar. Two men in particular led the effort to restore the altar: Jeshua (or Joshua) and Zerubbabel. Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, most likely is the same person mentioned in Haggai 1:1,12 as “Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.” Zerubbabel is described as the “governor of Judah” in Haggai 1:1. These two men represented the religious and civil arms of the Jewish community; they joined together to lead an important task in the restoration of God’s covenant people.

The people desired to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. The Day of Atonement was approaching. The people of God needed to demonstrate their repentance through sacrificial worship. The worship emphasized God’s acceptance of a blood sacrifice (of an animal) to cover the people’s sin. This blood sacrifice foreshadowed the new covenant in which Jesus, through His sacrificial death on the cross, provided not just a “covering” of sins but instead a complete atonement for sins (see Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:12,15,24-26).

A bigger concern for the construction team was opposition to the project from other groups. During the years the exiles lived in Babylon and Persia, other ethnic groups had established their presence in and influence over the region around Jerusalem. These people were bound to see the Jews’ rebuilding efforts as a threat to their power. Although the Jews feared these groups, they set up the altar and began to offer the morning and evening sacrifices prescribed in God’s Word. God’s people should never be surprised when their devotion to the Lord evokes opposition from the Devil’s crowd. Courageous believers obey God regardless of fear or opposition.