

Return, Revive, Rebuild
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Text: Topical Taken from The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Central Idea of Message: **The time for returning to worship of God is immediate. The time for being revived by hearing and applying the word of God is now. The time for rebuilding what is broken is upon us.**

Introduction: By no stretch of the imagination, 2020 and 2021 have been challenging years. In March 2020, our church issued a call to an Interim Youth Pastor, an action which caused division in our congregation. Within weeks of this, we were all ushered into an unprecedented time of quarantine lasting approximately nine weeks. Church staff tried mightily to provide meaningful worship experiences by pre-recording music and messages and posting them on our church website. Then, Memorial weekend Sunday of 2020, we resumed in-person worship in this facility. But we had no Sunday school. We had no children's ministry. We had no youth ministry. We had no choir ministry. We had no senior adult ministry. We had no fellowship meals. We had no Sunday night service. We had no Wednesday night Bible Study. All of these were suspended out of fear of COVID and its spread.

In mid-summer of 2020, a modified youth ministry resumed and in October 2020 a truncated Sunday school plan was implemented. Although these were only baby steps, they were welcome and much needed. We were beginning to show signs of life. Oh yes, and then there was a presidential election amid the pandemic!

Next, we had a stirring Christmas Eve Candlelight Service which was wonderfully orchestrated and surprisingly well attended. We were beginning to show even more signs of life.

But the bitter cold, the assault of COVID on many of our number, and even the death of several of our precious members over a seven month period (Phillip Bell in July 2020 and LeRoy Charles in February 2021) stuck us all right in the heart. Church, and even life itself, seemed held hostage.

For all practical purposes, many of us have felt like exiled captives in a foreign land trying to figure out our "new normal." But, we are not the first or the only ones to experience such a depressing period of seeming deportation. The ancient Jews beat us to it; suffering murders, rapes, and other unspeakable

atrocities at the hands of the invading Babylonian army, as well as seeing their beloved Jerusalem's walls breeched and then reduced to rubble, followed by the plundering of the inhabitants' goods. But the invaders were not finished until they had completely destroyed the sacred Temple of Solomon located on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, after scavenging every ounce of gold, silver, bronze, and precious jewels adorning the temple and its utensils. Then, to add insult to injury, the Jews were marched in three separate waves of deportation on their own "Trail of Tears" trek from Jerusalem to Babylon, thus beginning their seventy years of captivity - a type of quarantine - and certainly a demoralizing deportation into exile. Lives were radically changed from that point forward.

But what would happen at the end of the seventy years of captivity would stun the Jews themselves and eventually amaze the world, for God had promised that a remnant would survive, meaning Israelites in general and Jews in particular, and that he himself would orchestrate their return, revive them, and inspire them to rebuild what had been demolished. I believe this same God - our God - wants to do the same for us!

I. **Return**

A. Captivity

1. Israel had acted corruptly by not keeping the commandments, statutes, and ordinances given through Moses (cf. Neh. 1:7)
 - a) Commandments: direct word from God to Moses
 - b) Statutes: specific policies of civil law
 - c) Ordinances: prescribed religious and moral practices
2. **First deportation: 605 B.C.**
 - a) Jeremiah prophesies the seventy-years of Babylonian captivity (Jer. 25:11)
 - b) A boy named Daniel is among those taken into Babylonian captivity in the first deportation (Dan. 1:1-7)
3. **Second deportation: 597 B.C.**
 - a) 598 B.C.
 - (1) Jehoiakim, the puppet King of Judah, revolts against Babylon but dies before punishment is inflicted upon him by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:6)
 - (2) Jehoiakim's eighteen year old son, Jehoiachin, becomes King of Judah (2 Kings 24:8)
 - b) 597 B.C.

- (1) Jehoiachin, King of Judah, is compelled to surrender Jerusalem and go into captivity himself (2 Kings 24:8-16), along with a young fellow named Ezekiel
 - (2) This is the second deportation
 - (3) Jehoiakim's uncle, Zedekiah, also known as Mattaniah, is installed as king by Nebuchadnezzar
4. **Third deportation: 586 B.C.**
- a) Zedekiah rebels against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, eventually resulting in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Southern Kingdom and home primarily to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, being completely destroyed, leaving the city, its walls, and its temple a heap of burned and broken ruins
 - b) More Jews are exiled to Babylon in this third deportation (2 Kings 25:1-12)
- B. Release
- 1. 539 B.C.
 - a) Some Jewish captives and descendants rise to positions of prominence, particularly after the Medo-Persian Empire overthrows the Babylonian Empire under the leadership of King Cyrus
 - b) **Isaiah had even called Cyrus by name, writing nearly 200 years earlier (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13)!**
 - 2. **538 B.C.**
 - a) Approximately 50,000 Jews living in exile in Babylon, which now belongs to Persia, return to Jerusalem and are repatriated after the liberating decree of Cyrus (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-3), including the newly appointed governor of Judah, Sheshbazzar, and his nephew, Zerubbabel
 - b) **This is the first group returning from exile in Babylon, some 900 walking-miles away, and the primary focus is rebuilding the temple**
 - c) The journey took about four months, covering about seven miles per day (Ezra 8:32; cf. Whitcomb 430; cf. Ezra 7:8-9)

II. Revive

A. **In 458 B.C. a second group returns to do more work in Jerusalem, about 1,800 men, plus women and children, totaling between 4,000 and 5,000, led by a scribe-priest named Ezra**

B. Ezra

1. Ezra is a Levite of high priestly descent who is related to Aaron, thus he had the authority and pedigree to teach God's law (Ezra 7:1-5)
2. Scribes were expert copiers and instructors of the Scriptures who assumed the teaching role of the priests after the exile
 - a) Zerubbabel's focus was on rebuilding the temple
 - b) Ezra's focus was on rebuilding the people's covenant obligations to God
 - c) Nehemiah's focus would be on rebuilding the wall
3. **Ezra is God's Bible-teaching leader who inspires revival amongst the Israelites returning to Jerusalem**
4. Seventy years of captivity had purged the people of their idolatry and had made their hearts yearn for their homeland and a restored covenant relationship with the God of their fathers
5. The people were ready to hear and heed God's word and to keep God's law as given in the Scriptures
6. The same God was keeping the promises he had made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David!
7. The return from exile was more evidence for the existence of God and for his involvement with Israel!
8. Strangely, however, many Israelites chose to remain in Babylon, likewise, some who were involved in a church before COVID will decide that they have learned to live without church - or even without God
9. The people gathered to hear the law (Neh. 8:1)
 - a) Public reading of the Scriptures was required every seventh year, but had long since ceased
 - b) What a blessing to have a hunger for God's word!
 - c) The people gathered in unity at the square in front of the Water Gate
 - d) They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel

- (1) Read from early morning until midday (Neh. 8:3)
- (2) Ezra stood on a wooden platform (Neh. 8:4)
- e) The people stood in respect when Ezra opened the book (Neh. 8:5)
 - (1) They knew they were about to hear the word of God, not the word of a man
 - (2) The posture of reverence suggested the collective desire of the people to receive the word with readiness to obey
 - (3) The people likely stood for five or six hours as Ezra read and explained
 - (a) What about bathroom breaks and other recesses?
 - (b) In most American churches, the shorter the sermon, the better people like it
 - (4) **Things go bad for a nation, a church, or a household that drifts from God's word!**
- f) Levite men explained the law to the people (Neh. 8:7-8)
 - (1) Read and explained
 - (2) Helped the people understand what was being read
 - (a) Expository preaching
 - (b) Verse by verse
- g) The people had been weeping as they heard the word read and explained (Neh. 8:9)
- h) The Levites calmed the people (Neh. 8:11)
 - (1) Told them to be still because the day was holy
 - (2) Told them not to grieve
 - (3) This day was a time for joy over what was coming, not a time for sorrow over what was in the past
 - (a) God had delivered the people of Israel from captivity - again!
 - (b) God had defeated the enemies of Israel - again!
 - (c) Jerusalem was a walled city once again!
- i) **Reading and explaining God's word resulted in a revival (Neh. 8:12)!**
 - (1) The people followed the instructions and went to eat, drink, share, and celebrate

- (2) Hearing and understanding God's word is cause for celebration!
10. The people stood to confess the sins and iniquities of their fathers (Neh. 9:2)
 11. Here are some keys to revival and success in life (Ezra 7:10; Neh. 9:3)
 - a) Hearing the Scriptures: God speaks to us
 - b) Praising God: we exalt and thank God
 - c) Praying: we speak to God
 - d) Confessing sin: we acknowledge our sin to God
 - e) Repenting of sin: separate ourselves from what displeases God
 - (1) Weeping is good, but repentance and restitution are better!
 - (2) It is not enough simply to be sorry for sins, measures must be taken to correct them
 12. **"Those with a proper perception of God's holiness will tremble at his word" (Yamauchi 664)**
 13. **"Great revivals begin when great souls go to a great God with great fervor" (James Smith on Ezra 9:7-15)**
 14. The presence of the remnant was due to God's grace (Ezra 9:8)

III. Rebuild

A. Altar

1. Rebuilt according to Exod. 20:25 standards (Ezra 3:2)
2. They set up the altar on its foundation (Ezra 3:3)
 - a) They were terrified of the people of the lands
 - b) This indicates opposition from neighboring people groups
 - c) They believed that worship of God and obedience to him might encourage his protection for them
 - d) **Faith can often be measured by what we do when we are rattled or afraid**

B. Temple: the rebuilding of the temple became the first priority of the returning exiles, thus magnifying the importance of worship of almighty God and offering sacrifice to him, beginning with oneself

1. 536 B.C.: The rebuilding work on the temple in Jerusalem is begun

2. 534 B.C.: The rebuilding work on the temple in Jerusalem is discontinued
3. 520 B.C.
 - a) God provided two prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) to preach to the people and rebuke their "shameful indifference" (Ezra 5:1)
 - b) The rebuilding work on the temple in Jerusalem is resumed
4. 515 B.C.: The rebuilding work on the temple is completed under the leadership of the new governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, and is given his name, Zerubbabel's Temple (Ezra 5:2)
5. Some from the older generation who had seen Solomon's Temple weep with sorrow because the new temple foundation is not as impressive (Ezra 3:12)
6. **"While young people tend to be overly exuberant, old people often miss the excitement of the present by dwelling on the past" (James Smith)**
7. **It is always best to look ahead and not behind!**

C. Wall

1. 445 B.C.
 - a) Nehemiah, a Jewish cupbearer to Artaxerxes King of Persia, still in Persia some 700 miles away, hears of the ruined condition of the wall in Jerusalem and contemplates action
 - b) Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem and leads a wall-rebuilding project which, even with significant internal and external opposition, is completed in just fifty-two days
 - (1) God's work always has enemies and obstacles, therefore, God's people always have enemies and obstacles
 - (2) The people of God rose above the discouragements by praying and working
 - (3) **Prayer and preparedness must both be employed in accomplishing the work of God!**
 - (4) Part of God's divine assistance can be seen in his provision of inspiration to Nehemiah and other leaders as well as to the workers themselves
 - c) **Nehemiah led the people not only to rebuild the walls, but also to renew their commitment to God and his will**

- d) Nehemiah was not a prophet, priest, or king, but a concerned layman who was willing to give up the luxury and ease of the Persian palace in order to serve his God and help his people
- e) God puts into the minds of his people projects which promote his kingdom and his glory (cf. Neh. 2:9-20)

2. **This is the third group to return to Jerusalem from Babylon (three deportations now countered by three groups of returnees - 538 B.C., 458 B.C., and 445 B.C.)**

- a) **All twelve tribes were represented; the civil war between Israel and Judah was over!**
- b) **All these tribes and people were united by common spiritual concerns: (1) to see the house of the Lord, (2) the wall of Jerusalem, and (3) the covenant obligations all rebuilt**
- c) **In life, there can be no winning without warring, no opportunity without opposition, no triumph without trouble, and no victory without vigilance (cf. Baxter 230-1)**
- d) **What does not break us makes us!**

D. **City**

- 1. Construction would soon be under way to prepare the city of Jerusalem for the future arrival of the Messiah (cf. Dan. 9:24-27)!
- 2. Jerusalem was a foreshadowing of the ideal city of God under his theocratic rule and rebuilding it is a cry for this theocratic reign
- 3. **Rebuilding a church's ministries and functionality is both a witness to God's grace and a cry for his rule over its people**
- 4. **Almost everyone got involved in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, even those who were not brick masons, including the young ladies (Neh. 3:12)**
 - a) Unity in the midst of diversity brought these people together for a common cause
 - b) Cooperation between people, priests, rulers, goldsmiths, merchants, men, women, communities, families, rich and poor alike can accomplish much for the glory of God!

- c) **Our goal is to see every person attending FBC Pryor plugged in somewhere doing something for the furtherance of God's kingdom!**
- E. Population (Neh. 7:1-4)
1. Nehemiah knew that God did not have the wall rebuilt around the city for it to remain mostly uninhabited
 2. **God does not build churches to sit and stagnate either!**
 3. **But people, not buildings, are the key to continuing God's work!**

Conclusion: Significant principles:

(1) **Some of us need to ask ourselves if we are the leaders God wants us to be, while others of us need to ask ourselves if we are the followers God wants us to be.**

(2) **In the rebuilding effort, we must all roll up our sleeves and be willing to do things we've never done before, in terms of returning, giving, and serving.**

(3) **The greatest abilities in serving the Lord are availability and dependability!**

(4) **When the word of God is read and explained, people should respond by weeping over trespasses and rejoicing over God's love, forgiveness, and provision.**

(5) **Wise leaders direct their followers to obey God's word, even instituting radical reforms when necessary, in order to avoid the judgment of God and to experience the blessings of God.**

Surely something in this message spoke positively to you. I am asking that you swing into action by returning to regular worship and Sunday school attendance, by being revived by God's word, and by getting involved somewhere in the life of this church's rebuilding efforts: children's ministry, youth ministry, teaching, choir, band, kitchen, building and properties maintenance, senior adult ministry, women's ministry, praise team, sound and lighting team, the Hope Closet, missions, or something else.

The time for returning to worship of God is immediate. The time for being revived by hearing and applying the word of God is now. The time for rebuilding what is broken is upon us.