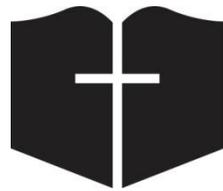


From the Pulpit of



EVANSTON

Bible Fellowship

Starting Over

No. 1

Ezra 1:1-11

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Series: Ezra

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Happy Mother's Day to all the moms out there! Have you ever heard of the phrase, "Mommy guilt?" At times, you feel it when the kids are trying to shame you into doing something for them. Often it's actual guilt you feel for blowing it with your kids. I sometimes feel "Daddy guilt" for being a lousy parent - not just for a day or two but sometimes for a season. I'm slacking off leading them in the Lord, I'm easily upset or I'm spending too much time on my phone. After a while I come to my senses and by God's grace I can find forgiveness and start again.

It's kind of similar to our spiritual lives, when we can be walking with the Lord and have a desire to obey Him, but then we tank. You can be in the Word, prayer, fellowship, obedience, loving others and then just drop off the map with the Lord as you drift. You go through a season of rebellion or maybe distraction or indifference. But by God's grace, like the prodigal son, you come to your senses and you return to the Father. It's like you start again. Our God is a God of grace and through Jesus sinners are welcome to return and start again.

In the Bible we see this consistent pattern of God's grace and patient endurance with His people. Over the coming weeks we will see this pattern of grace in the book of Ezra. God doesn't scrap His wayward people, but restores and renews them so they can worship Him. He enables His people to start over and begin anew. It's an amazing display of grace. Turn to the book of Ezra. Let's get our Biblical and historical bearings as we place the book of Ezra in an appropriate timeline. God created the world, Noah, Abraham, Israel goes to Egypt, Exodus out of Egypt, David, kingdom splits (Northern and Judah). Northern Kingdom destroyed, Judah exiled to Babylon due to sin, Exodus out of Babylon back to Jerusalem to rebuild, 400 years of Biblical silence, Jesus Christ.

The first 6 chapters in Ezra are about the original exiles (first wave) who returned to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. This effort was led by Zerubbabel. Once we hit chapter 7, about 80 years have passed since the exiles have returned, then Ezra comes onto the scene to establish the people in the ways of the Lord and His law. Ezra is part of the latter returning exiles (second wave) to Jerusalem. He was about 13 years before Nehemiah, but their missions had some overlap. Nehemiah's mission was to build up the walls for security and Ezra's mission was to build the people up in the Law of the Lord. Ezra was focused on renewal, to see the people of God spiritually renewed in their commitment to the Lord. It's a

story of starting over.¹ In fact, chapter 1 ends with the language of starting over as verse 11 says that the exiles were ‘brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem.’ That statement alone is loaded with much hope in a new start. The years of discipline and dryness are coming to an end and real hope back in the land with the Lord is on the horizon. Today is a good day for you to leave Babylon and head back to Jerusalem and renew your commitment to the Lord in worship.

Let’s look at our passage this morning. (This is almost identical from 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.) Ezra 1:1: “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing...” Let’s look at the facts and the faith. First, consider the historical facts and then the faithfulness of what God is doing for His people. Verse 1 establishes the historical setting: “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia...” The Babylonians were the ones who conquered Judah and brought many of the Israelites to exile in Babylon. Now the Babylonians have been conquered by the Persians. And ‘the first year of Cyrus king of Persia’ is actually the first year of the reign of the Persians. This is significant because the Persians are going to create a policy that the conquered and displaced people can return to their land, their religions and rebuild their temples. This was a good policy to keep the people appeased. The Jews were also given the opportunity to participate in this return.

These are the historical facts of King Cyrus and the Persian policy. These facts are observable in history, but God is behind history moving in mighty ways. For starters, God raised up King Cyrus to not only conquer the Babylonians, but to eventually restore His people. Isaiah 45:1: “Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed...” Isaiah 45:13: “I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts.” Cyrus is clueless that he is an instrument in God’s hands but God was working for the benefit of his people just like he said through the prophet Jeremiah. Verse 1 says, “...that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled...” When the exiles were originally taken to Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah exhorted them to live as Invested Sojourners. They were to Settle (in the land), Grow (numerically and spiritually) and Invest (in the people of the City). They were to be there for a while as discipline for their sin but Jeremiah also prophesied a return. Jeremiah 29:10: “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.” After the length of their exile is complete, the Lord will bring them back to the land. One generation heard the prophecy of return and now another generation is experiencing the fulfillment of that prophecy.

The Lord initiates the fulfillment by stirring up King Cyrus: “...the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.” We see the historical facts of the politics of the proclamation but the Lord is behind all the politics. Through the Babylonians God orchestrated events to make it hard on His people through discipline. Now through the Persians God is orchestrating events for the renewal of His people. God is always moving and working for the benefit of His people. Sometimes it’s through seasons of discipline and sometimes it’s through seasons of renewal. Where are you?

¹ *ESV Study Bible*, page 802.

This edict would be verbally ‘proclaimed throughout all his kingdom’ including the specific Jewish communities, and it was also ‘put in writing.’ Here are the details to the Jews starting in verse 2: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: 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.” Cyrus acknowledged the God of the Jews as “The Lord, the God of heaven...” He’s not a true believer, but is probably ‘coached up’ by his advisers on the right lingo. Perhaps he has heard the prophecies about him and concluded that the Lord ‘has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.’ In addition, the Lord has ‘charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.’ Solomon’s great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, but Cyrus has been stirred up by God to rebuild it. This is good political language and connection with the Jews. Verse 3: “Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.” Cyrus gives the invitation and blessing to anyone among the Jews who would like to go back to Jerusalem and participate in rebuilding ‘the house of the Lord.’ Cyrus’ motives are skewed as he wants to appease the gods of the people around him so that the gods will return a blessing upon him. In fact, a document that was found around the 19th century, called the ‘Cyrus Cylinder,’ reveals the motives of Cyrus. “May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me.”² His view of worship is severely tainted but God is using Him to facilitate renewal and genuine worship among His people.

Sometimes God will make a way for your renewal and catalyze your worship through unexpected ways. Unlikely events can jolt you awake. An illness comes your way or an unexpected job loss and you find yourself crying out to God in more ways than usual. Or, you get busted in a sin and the consequences are terrible but you find yourself awakened to the realities of the Gospel and you worship. God will provide a way of renewal for His people so they can worship.

Now as we come to verse 4 we have the language of a second Exodus. Just as the Israelites didn’t leave Egypt empty handed, so the Jews will not leave Babylon empty handed. Verse 4: “And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” Those who ‘survived’ the Babylonian attack many years ago along with the next generation are allowed to go back and they will be blessed along the way by their pagan neighbors ‘with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts’ and a variety of ‘offerings for the house of God.’ This is similar to the Exodus from Egypt, as the Israelites were blessed by the Egyptians with silver and gold as they went on their way (Exodus 12:35-36). This second Exodus was an opportunity to start again in worshipping the Lord.

But who is going to want to go back to Jerusalem? Though religiously nostalgic, it’s not the most appealing scenario. But God will stir up worshippers as we see in verse 5: “Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.” This is miraculous! Just as God supernaturally stirred up Cyrus to issue the decree, so He has stirred up some of His people to return and worship. This has to be supernatural because most would have no desire to go back to Jerusalem. The trip would be about a 1,000 mile return over 3-5 months. Once they get there they couldn’t stay in a hotel or a nice Airbnb

² Derek Kidner.

because their city was in ruins. And those who were already in the land would probably be hostile. In addition, this is mostly two generations after the original exiles, who hadn't lived in Israel; they hadn't seen the glory days. Things were going pretty well; it doesn't make sense for them to return. But the Lord stirred them up.

The Lord still stirs His people today. Even when you are comfortable in Babylon, the Lord stirs you up to change and worship. He stirs you up to do the hard work of walking in purity rather than bowing to idols. God stirs the hearts of those drifting from Christ towards being renewed through a fresh encounter with the Gospel. God stirs up his people to take risks and share the Gospel locally and globally. God has been stirring my wife and me for the last several years to care for the needs of vulnerable children as an act of worship. Where is God stirring you to leave the comforts of Babylon for Jerusalem in order to obey and worship?

Before they set out, they were loaded up with blessings and the vessels of temple worship. Verses 6-11: "And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem." Not only did they carry back all the gifts from their neighbors, but they brought back the vessels from the original temple as well. These were the vessels, basins, censers and bowls that were carted off by the Babylonians and placed among their 'gods' as the trophies of conquered gods. But Jeremiah prophesied that these stolen items would one day make it back to Jerusalem. Jeremiah 27:21-22: "...thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the LORD. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place." In Ezra we see the fulfillment of the promise to not only bring the people back but also the vessels of the Temple in order to renew worship. God is not only calling for worship, but He is making provision for worship.

The people, along with the vessels, are 'brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.' Let the renewal begin as the people are fueled for worship. In a similar way we can say God will always make provision for your worship. He will always make a way to obey and praise Him. Philippians 2:12-13: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Equipped to Worship.

Conclusion: Consider the connection to us today. We are those who are a part of the Third Exodus.³ God brought His people out of Egypt through Moses, out of Persia through the pagan Cyrus and us out of our bondage to sin, Satan and death through Jesus Christ. Through Christ we have been brought from the bondage of Babylon to the freedom in Christ. If you have settled for life in Babylon, but realize that worship in Jerusalem is far greater, then ask God to stir your

³ P.G. Matthew

heart for a return. You can begin again with a repentant heart and be renewed and fueled for worship.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, May 8, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.