

## **A Return to the Land** **Ezra & Nehemiah**

*“The whole world is a theatre for the display of Gods divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power.” –*  
John Calvin

If Calvin is right and the world is God’s theater, then human history is the stage within the theater and upon this stage God has progressively revealed the story of redemption.

*Historical Note: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear as two separate works in our English bibles but they were originally two parts of a single work. Commentator H.G Williamson states “that these books should be studied as a single whole.” Josephus and the great Christian historian Eusebius believed the books to be a whole unit. Origen was the first among many to divide these books into two separate units. Moreover, the historical setting of the two books is following Israel’s demise in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians after the split of the Israelite kingdom into the two factions (Israel and Judah). While the kingdom of Israel is no more, for 150 years the small kingdom of Judah will continue to exist until their ruination, including the city of Jerusalem and the temple, at the hands of the Babylonians under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar.*

The Israelites were in captivity and exile. It was one of the darkest periods to occur upon the stage of human history. The exile demonstrated the consequences of sin and Gods discipline due to sin; sin was the great evil that brought disaster to Gods people. Sin infiltrated, separated, and contaminated everything in its path and had brought nothing good to the Israelites. It is because of their sin that God’s people were carried off into captivity. However, while in captivity a few of God’s people began to take hope in the promises of a gracious God. Jeremiah 25:11 “This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” Jeremiah prophesized that the people would be in exile for 70 years due to their sin but after this 70 year trial they would return to the land. Daniel understands the nature of the prophecy and petitions God about the fulfillment in Daniel 9. God’s gracious promise forms the foundation upon which the books of Ezra and Nehemiah rest and it is upon this foundation that God acts for His glory and for the benefit of His people.

### **The Return of God’s People**

Read Ezra 1:1-11

## *The Scope of God's Sovereignty*

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:". Of particular note in verse 1 is the identity of the orchestrator of the events. God does not simply move a governor, mere man, or an insignificant subject in the Persian Empire; He compels the potentate of the world to act: King Cyrus. Cyrus was a man of tremendous power and prestige. He was the absolute ruler of the known world at this time. His kingdom extended into vast regions of the world and he known to be a brilliant conqueror and master strategist. Historians tell us that he wielded the power of one of the largest armies known to man. Cyrus was also a loved and well-regarded king among the people. The ancient Historian Xenophon, in his book Cyropedia (Chronicles of Cyrus), said *"And those who were subject to him, he treated with esteem and regard, as if they were his own children, while his subjects themselves respected Cyrus as their 'Father' ... What other man but 'Cyrus', after having overturned an empire, ever died with the title of 'The Father' from the people whom he had brought under his power? For it is a plain fact that this is a name for one that bestows, rather than for one that takes away!"* Yet, even this king, though very great, powerful and well-loved, was still a man subject to the sovereign rule of God. He, like all, would yield to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Cyrus is a veritable object lesson whereby the extent of the sovereign rule of God can be displayed; there are no limits to His sovereignty. God's power to move Cyrus confirms Psalm 103:19 "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" and Daniel 4:35 "all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

In God's kingdom, in His universe, there are no Sovereign Satan's, Dominionist Demons, Autonomous Atoms, Mighty Molecules or Exalted Electrons. There is only one sovereign who sits enthroned in the heavens, who wields the scepter of absolute power and that is the Sovereign God. The Israelites are able to return to the land not by their own power but by the power of the Sovereign.

### Application Questions

Do you recognize that God is sovereign?

When trials come are you attacked by a sense of hopelessness or do you look to Him for help?

How do you feel in times of prosperity? Are you prone to forgetting God or do you praise him from whom all blessings flow?

Are you functioning daily as a practical atheist or are you a believer in the power of the true and living God?

## *The Stability of God's Sovereignty*

To be stable is to be firmly established; that which is stable is not easily shaken or influenced by outside forces. The Sovereignty of God is forever stable because it is connected to all the perfect attributes of His being. His grace, His wrath, His love, His sovereignty, His omniscience, His omnipresence, His

omnipotence, His faithfulness, His holiness, His kindness; all of His perfect attributes are always present and working whenever He moves. If God moves, or acts, all of His attributes move, or act, with Him. Ezra is communicating that God never moves in Sovereign power without moving in line with his other perfections. The nature of God's sovereignty is that it is always holy, pure and without sin. His sovereign acts will always be rooted in justice and loving kindness.

Deuteronomy 32:4 “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”

### Application

This truth should bring us great comfort because we know that He will never act in an unholy or faithless manner. The doctrine of God's Sovereignty should be a pillow upon which we can rest our heads and should fuel our prayer life. By it we should be moved to seek Him for He is running the control center of the universe as a Holy, patient, and good God.

### *The Grace of Gods Sovereignty*

Ezra 1:5 “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.”

Josephus in his work “Antiquities of the Jews” said: “*When Cyrus had given his decree to the Israelites, the rulers of two tribes of Judah and Benjamin with the Levites and Priest, went in haste to Jerusalem: yet did many of them stay at Babylon as not willing to leave their possessions.*” F. Charles Fensham also said “ Not all Jews in Babylonia went back to Judah. A significant group stayed behind, because they had become prosperous and were satisfied with conditions in that country. They enjoyed a great amount of freedom and some of them concentrated with great success on business. More than a century later the Murashu family as we know from the cuneiform tablets started the very first banking center in human history.” It's clear the Israelites were enamored by and had come to love Babylon with all of its trappings, its culture and its worldliness. They had developed a deep and abiding affection for Babylon and were not seeking after God. Rather it would take a sovereign God seeking after them and their hearts to move them from their captivity in the city.

What the Israelites deserve, for their rejection of and disobedience to God, is death or abandonment; yet, what these people receive is grace. God's people are not brought back because of their good works or piety but rather by a gracious God who has pity upon them because they are blinded by sin. He warms their hearts and calls them back to fellowship with Himself.

### Application

We are no different today. We too were infatuated by and powerless against our sin when we were without Christ in this world. 603,550 men went into the Promised Land and only 42,360 came back which

speaks to the power and devastating effects of sin. In the same way that it took a sovereign God to compel the 42,360 to the promised land, it took a sovereign God to redeem us from the power of sin and His just wrath. Out of the masses of people in Babylon, all blind, all seeking their own way, all loving their sin God is gracious enough to bring back two tribes. Likewise, out of the sinful mass of humanity God chose you and brought you to Himself. We are powerless in and of ourselves to come to God, but He is powerful, willing and able to bring us to Himself.

### *The Wonder of God's Sovereignty*

Ezra 1:7-11 "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."

#### Application

In these verses we see what God intended for the Israelites to see: that this Awesome God, who dwells in an unapproachable light, who sits in the midst of myriads and myriads of mighty angels, who hears His praises year after year, is not a God who is above the triviality of overseeing the guidance of pots and pans. He is revealing that, though He is mighty, the minutia of this life is not outside His scope of care. If He cares about pans, how much more does He care about you? How great is His care if, hundreds of years after a story involving pots and pans, would He stoop even lower and take on human flesh for the redemption of His people?

Philippians 2:5-8 "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

He is the only being who ever lived who chose to whom He would be born. He did not choose a person of royalty or renown, but a poor teenage girl. He was born, not in a castle, but in the unsanitary conditions of a manger. He stooped low enough to oversee the salvation of our souls. Is there any other God in all the world, galaxy or deep regions of the universe who is like this?

#### Application Questions

Do you ever feel like you can't go to God with small or insignificant issues?

### **The Restoration**

#### *Restoration of Identity*

The people were in a fearful state recognizing that they could not overcome the obstacles in front of them related to their captivity. So they do that which is countercultural, instead of electing a King, building an army or obtaining weapons, they build an altar. The altar would have reminded the people that they were redeemed and gave them clarity about who they were and to whom they belonged. It was through this altar that God re-established their identity.

### Application

The Israelites found their identity at the sacrificial altar of God and we must find ours at the true sacrificial altar of God, which is the cross of Christ. We are to be a Cross-centered people whose identity is wrapped up in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ must form our identity and permeate every facet of our lives. In marriage, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. In pastoring the people of God, elders are to take heed to themselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with his own blood. In putting sin to death, Romans 6:1-4, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

### Application Questions

Where does your identity lie today? Is it in your job, children, possessions or degrees?

### *Restoration of Communion*

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid."

In the Old Testament, the temple was significant because it was there where communion with God took place. In many places in the Old Testament it is recorded that the presence of God would rest upon the temple, effectually showing the people of God that He was there and that he was their God. The Israelites are again enjoying true communion but only after the altar has been rebuilt. The sacrifices made upon the

altar paved the way for Israel to rebuild the foundations of the temple where communion and true worship of God could take place. It was not by their works but by way of the altar they were able to commune with God.

#### Application

Our past, our works, our merit dictates our communion with God. Just as the people of Israel reestablished communion (fellowship) with God through rebuilding the temple and setting up the altar, if we would establish fellowship with God we must do so through Jesus Christ and His work on the cross.

Hebrews 10:19-20 “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.”

“Jesus turns the father’s eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins. He so reconciles the father’s heart to us that by his intercession he prepares a way and access for us to the Father’s throne.” – John Calvin

### *Restoration of Community*

#### Application

In Ezra 3:1 the people gathered together as one around the altar. They began to work, suffer and overcome together. This is meant to show us that we cannot live our lives alone. Nehemiah 2:20 “Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”. In times of trouble we often attempt to hide or stand alone, however, this is not what God would have us do. 1 Corinthians 12:26 “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” Moreover, in Ephesians 6:12, Paul uses the plural pronoun “we” wrestle against satan and his powers. We are not meant to fight these foes alone but with one another in God.

### **The Reformation**

Ezra 9:1-2 “After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.”

God had warned the Israelites before in Exodus that not separating themselves from the people of the land would be a snare to them because of those people false (not their ethnicity). Though Nehemiah has introduced social and political reforms, the same sin that had landed them in exile, from which they have just been brought out of, they are quickly committing again. Their reformation is powerless and short-lived

and they once again return to idolatry. The people have returned to the land but their hearts have not returned to God.

### Application

Just like the Israelites, we need a reformation of the heart only Jesus Christ can offer. On Golgotha's hill, he offered himself as a sacrifice for sin. It is only His spirit that can reform the hearts of dead sinners and bring them back to God.

Sermon Link : [A Return to the Land](#)

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