

August 9, 2009 by Steve Brandon



Twelve Stages in the Bible - Return

Ezra, Nehemiah

1. Zerubbabel
2. Ezra
3. Nehemiah

In our overview series of the Bible, we come this morning to look at the return of the Jews after the exile. [\[1\]](#) If you recall from last week, we saw Judah exiled in Babylon. God brought them there because of their sin. And now, this morning, we will see Judah return to Jerusalem. God will bring them there because of His grace.

So, open your Bibles to the book of Ezra. My message this morning will cover the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In many ways, it's going to be a simple and straightforward message, as we walk through these books together. Ezra begins like this, ...

Ezra 1:1-4

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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. Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

These words are almost identical to the words found at the end of 2 Chronicles on the previous page.

2 Chronicles 36:22-23

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia--in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah--the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"

These words are repeated twice in the Scriptures. Perhaps it's because they are so incredibly amazing.

- 1) First of all, what makes these words so amazing is the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had prophesied that Judah would come back into the land a mere 70 years after they had gone into Exile into Babylon. He prophesied this even **before** the exile took place. After Jeremiah had prophesied of the exile to Babylon, he said, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place'" (Jeremiah 29:10). On another occasion, Jeremiah prophesied of how God had promised to punish Babylon for her sins. "'Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans'" (Jer. 25:12).

Indeed, at this time (at the beginning of the book of Ezra), we can see the punishment of Babylon beginning, because, the Babylonians are no longer in power. Cyrus here is a Persian king. He is identified as such in verse 1, "Cyrus king of Persia." The Jews were in Babylon, servants of the Babylonians, until the Persians came in and conquered them. Now, as soon as the Persians ruled the day, the Jews were free to return to their land. That's the point of verse 1, "Now in the **first year** of Cyrus king of Persia." One of the very first acts of Cyrus was to permit the Jews to return to the land.

- 2) But what makes this verse particularly amazing is Isaiah's prophecy of this event. At the very end of Isaiah 44, we read these things,

Isaiah 44:24-45:3

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb,
"I, the LORD, am the maker of all things,
Stretching out the heavens by Myself

And spreading out the earth all alone,
Causing the omens of boasters to fail,
Making fools out of diviners,
Causing wise men to draw back
And turning their knowledge into foolishness,
Confirming the word of His servant
And performing the purpose of His messengers
It is I who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited!'
And of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built.'
And I will raise up her ruins again.
It is I who says to the depth of the sea, 'Be dried up!'
And I will make your rivers dry.
It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd!
And he will perform all My desire '
And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,'
And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"

Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
Whom I have taken by the right hand,
To subdue nations before him
And to loose the loins of kings;
To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
"I will go before you and make the rough places smooth;
I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.
I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden wealth of secret places,
So that you may know that it is I,
The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name."

Isaiah wrote these words more than 150 years before Cyrus came to power. This was long before Cyrus was born. This was long before the father of Cyrus was born. This was probably before the grand-father of Cyrus was born.

And so it came to pass. About 150 years after Isaiah prophesied, God raised up a man named Cyrus, who would become king of Persia. And this nation would come to have power, power enough even to conquer the mighty Babylon.

Cyrus had the power to conquer the most mighty kingdom in the world, because God said, "I have taken [him] by the right hand, to subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings" (Is. 45:1). Cyrus came to power because God was the power behind Cyrus. The Persians defeated Babylon because God defeated Babylon (Is. 45:1). Note how God had said, "I will go before you. ... I will shatter the doors. ... I will give you the treasures."

Of Cyrus, God says, "He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire. And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" (Is. 44:28). This was amazing, because at the time when Isaiah prophesied of these things, Jerusalem was standing. The temple was standing. But Isaiah prophesied of (1) the downfall of Jerusalem and the temple; (2) the raising to power of Cyrus; and (3) the rebuilding of the city and temple.

God is the one who "causes the omens of boasters to fail" (Is. 44:25). When false prophets makes a prediction, there are times when God works to make sure that the prediction is false. God is also the one who "confirms the word of His servant" (Is. 44:26). God so orchestrates history so that those who boast that they know what the future holds will find their prophecies to fail. God so orchestrates history so that His word will stand.

The opening verse of Ezra is simply incredible. It gives credit to the divine inspiration of the Bible. You who doubt in the power and authority of God and His word, take heed. God fulfills His promises. God's word will stand!

In Ezra 1:2, we see God's word standing.

Ezra 1:2

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah."

Cyrus clearly understood that God had placed him where he was. Cyrus clearly understood God's plans for him. He was to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. This was his first act as newly anointed king of Persia. He was under a divine mandate.

Notice how open ended the invitation was. In no way was Cyrus commanding or compelling certain Jews to return to the land. Rather, Cyrus was ready and willing to support any who wanted to go. The sense of the decree is this, "Whoever wants to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the LORD, feel free to go. Let offerings be taken up among the Jews, and let them go." And who went? Those who God stirred to go.

Ezra 1:5

Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

God was moving in the heart of Cyrus. God was moving in the heart of His people. There was support on all sides. Support came from the Jews who were staying in Babylon. They gave silver and gold and cattle to them to help them in their journey (according to verse 6). Support came from Cyrus, who gave to the Jews the "articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods" (according to verse 7. See also 2 Kings 24:12).

With the invitation, flocks of Jews returned to the land. The list of those who returned to Jerusalem covers all of chapter 2. The first few verses set the context, ...

Ezra 2:1-2

Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.

The most important of these names heads this list, Zerubbabel. He is the one who led the first wave of returnees to the land. When the people returned to the land of Judah, they all didn't come at once. Instead, there were three waves of their return. In 538 B. C., Zerubbabel led the first wave. In 458 B. C., Ezra led the second wave of returnees. In 444 B. C., Nehemiah led the third wave. These names will form the outline of my message this morning. Zerubbabel's story is told in Ezra 1-6. Ezra's story is told in Ezra 7-10. And Nehemiah's story is told in the entire book of Nehemiah. So, my first point here this morning is ...

1. Zerubbabel

According to Ezra 2:64, we see that "the whole assembly numbered 42,360."

In chapter 3, we find the Jews in the land. The first thing that they did was to build the altar of God. When the Babylonians came to Jerusalem, they wiped it clean. Nothing was left. No houses. No wall. No temple. No altar. And so, those who returned set their hearts upon the task at hand.

The altar was the first thing that was built. I can come up with all sorts of reasons why they build the altar first. It was easy. It was only a small piece of furniture. The altar may have also been first because the people wanted to set the priorities of their occupation of the land. While these may be true, there is a divine commentary of why they built the altar first.

Ezra 3:3

So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.

Building the temple wasn't easy. They were in a city without walls and without protection. They were living in makeshift structures. And they were afraid of the enemies around them. So, they worshiped to the LORD, their God, who alone could give them security. If God can stir the heart of Cyrus to send the people back to Jerusalem, then surely God can protect them from their enemies. And we shall see, beginning in chapter 4, that their enemies were numerous.

The second half of chapter 3 records the beginning of the work on the temple. We see the foundation laid in verses 10 and 11.

Ezra 3:10-11

Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." 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.

This was a great day! The construction on the temple had begun. They had a ceremony to dedicate the building to the LORD. What they did back then is similar to what our society does today. Whenever a major building project begins, there is often a dedication ceremony. I can picture men and women with shovels and with hard hats on their heads, putting their spades into the ground, turning over the first dirt of the building. We call it ground-breaking. Photographers are there to catch the images for the archives. People give speeches. There is often a party with punch and cookies that follows.

This is what Judah did. They had gathered the musicians. All the people worshiped the LORD and sang the chorus, "He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever" (Ezra 3:11). This morning in our service, we read responsively from Psalm 136. Twenty-six times in that Psalm, the refrain is given, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting." The idea here is the same. The goodness of God toward them was leading them to joy. They knew that the LORD's lovingkindness was upon Israel this day.

Think about it. Judah had been in exile for 70 years, but God stirred in the heart of Cyrus to make it possible for them to come back. And they were back in the land, beginning the process of restoring Jerusalem. God was working. And they knew it. And they were rejoicing!

When I think of this day, I think of the six day war in Israel in June, 1967. During that war, took the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank of the Jordan River (including East Jerusalem), and the Golan Heights. Israel's territory grew by a factor of three in only 6 days! I think of the day when Israeli paratroopers landed in Jerusalem and conquered the city and took control of the wailing wall and the foot of the temple mount. There is a famous picture of three paratroopers gazing looking around in amazement after taking and securing the wall. Perhaps you remember the picture.

Zion Karasenti was one of those soldiers. He said, ...

I was the first paratrooper to get to the Wailing Wall. I didn't know where I was, but I saw a female Israeli soldier, so I asked 'Where am I?' and she said: "The Wailing Wall." ... When I think of all the soldiers that died to take Jerusalem, I wonder if they would have thought it was worth it. I think they would. [\[2\]](#)

That's what I think that it was like on that day for the Jews. Here they were in the land! The foundation of the temple had been laid, right were the old one used to be! They were in amazement! It was a day of rejoicing. However, not all were rejoicing.

Ezra 3:12-13

Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

These are not tears of joy. These are tears of sorrow. Notice that the tears are from "the old men who had seen the first temple" (3:12). The temple had been destroyed when Jerusalem finally fell in 586 B. C. It was now some 50 years later that these old men were looking at the foundations of the temple. They remembered the grandeur of Solomon's temple. They looked at the footings established for this temple. And they knew that its glory would not even come close. And so, they wept. The prophet Haggai addressed the situation with these words, ...

Haggai 2:3-9

Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison? "But now take courage, Zerubbabel," declares the LORD, "take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage," declares the LORD, "and work; for I am with you," declares the LORD of hosts. "As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!" For thus says the LORD of hosts, "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD of hosts. "The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine," declares the LORD of hosts. "The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former," says the LORD of hosts, "and in this place I will give peace," declares the LORD of hosts.

I trust you see what the prophet was telling the people. "The work may seem small. It may not compare with the great temple of Solomon. In fact, for those of you who experienced the temple of Solomon, it may appear a nothing. But don't fear, 'I will fill this house with glory' (2:7). And 'the latter glory of this house will be greater than the former' (2:9)."

You say, "How is it that the latter glory is greater than the former? How can you be greater than the glory of Solomon?" Well, certainly, the glory spoken of here doesn't mean the glory of the building. The building was far less glorious. Furthermore, that building was torn down. When Jesus looked at the temple buildings, He said, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (Matt. 24:2). And that's what took place when the Romans came and leveled Jerusalem in 70 A. D. The temple was wiped away. But, God said, "I will fill this house with glory."

I believe that this was fulfilled when Jesus came into the temple. Perhaps you remember when Jesus was brought into the temple as a little child. Simeon took him into his arms and said, "My eyes have seen Your salvation, ... the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:30, 32). As Jesus was in the temple, it was filled with more glory than in the days of Solomon. When Jesus walked into the temple, it was the very temple that the Jews were working on building after they had returned from exile. And so, their building here was preparatory for the future glory to enter.

Perhaps there is also a sense in Haggai's prediction of the anticipation of the ultimate temple in heaven, in which God will dwell among the people and be the temple, Himself (Rev. 21:22).

Now, Haggai's words here were particularly appropriate for those building the temple. Time after time after time, he told them, "Take courage, ... take courage, ... take courage, ... do not fear" (2:4, 5). We don't have space in my message to look at all of the details, but chapters 4-6 are filled with the enemies of Israel opposing the work being done. The enemies of Israel seemingly pulled out every trick in the bag to thwart the building of the temple. They tried to deceive the people by flattering them and calling them their friends so that they could infiltrate the work (4:2). They tried to discourage the people (4:4). They hired counselors to go into their ranks to frustrate the people (4:5). They even wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes telling him of how terrible the Jews were, and how they were staging a revolt (4:15). Finally, the word came back from the king to stop the work. And the work stopped for 18 years (4:24).

At the beginning of chapter 5, we read of how Haggai came to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem and encouraged them to begin building (5:1). And so, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the Jews began building again (5:2). When their enemies saw this, the Jews appealed to

Darius, the next king of Persia. The Jews instructed those opposing the work to instruct him to perform a search of the annals for a decree from a king Cyrus. Back in Persia, indeed, they found the decree of Cyrus and proceeded to give governmental authority (6:7) and funding (6:9-10) to complete the work. Those who would violate the edict and thwart the work were punishable by crucifixion (6:11). ^[3] That is, they would be impaled upon a tree. What a great turn of events. The enemies were turned from being opposed to the work to being in full support of it.

The Jews finally finished building the temple in the sixth year of King Darius, which was By the end of chapter 6, the temple was finished and dedicated.

Ezra 6:16-17

And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel.

In verse 19, you see the Passover being celebrated for the first time in Jerusalem for nearly a hundred years. Life is good in Israel in these days. Oh, things may indeed be small. There may not be many people in the land. The glory of the temple may not be what it once was. But, as Zechariah said, ...

Zechariah 4:9-10

The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? But these seven will be glad when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel -- these are the eyes of the LORD which range to and fro throughout the earth.

Certainly, there were those in Judah who were despising the smallness of their work. But, Zechariah's words were to come as come encouragement. When God looked down upon the earth, He was glad! He could say, "My people are back in My land!"

That was the ministry of Zerubbabel. We now turn to the ministry of ...

2. Ezra

His story is told in Ezra 7-10. In fact, Ezra isn't even mentioned in the book of Ezra until chapter 7.

Now, there is a big gap in time between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7. It's a gap of 57 years. During this gap, the events of Esther took place. If you recall, she was the Hebrew maiden, who became queen and was the means through which God rescued the Jews from annihilation and extinction. As a result, there was a rising favor toward the Jewish people.

Chapter 7 begins with another wave of Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. They were led by Ezra. Ezra is described in verse 6, ...

Ezra 7:6

This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.

Ezra was primarily a scholar. He was an expert in the law. He used his giftedness to help lead Israel when they found themselves back in the land. Zerubbabel was more of a builder. Ezra was a teacher.

Ezra had the blessing of God upon his life. At the end of verse 6 we read that "the hand of the LORD his God was upon him." This is the key to the success of Ezra. God's hand was upon Him. We see this phrase again mentioned at the end of verse 9, "... the good hand of his God was upon him." One of the reasons why God's hand was upon Ezra was because of his heart. Verse 10 is a great verse exposing the reason for Ezra's success, ...

Ezra 7:10

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra pursued the law of the LORD with passion. He set his heart to do so. Have you ever seen anyone set their heart upon something? It often happens with my 2 year old son, David. He sets his heart upon some video, Sesame Street or Thomas the Train (or something of the sort). When it's time to stop watching, he isn't pleased. His heart is upon the television screen. Last night, David was watching a video with one of my children. It was time for dinner and so I picked him up and carried him over to his high chair. He was not happy with it and let out a little fuss. But, then, he set his heart upon his dinner. (If you know anything about my son, you will understand how easily and often he sets his heart upon his food). With Ezra, it was no different. His heart was upon the law of God. You couldn't take him away from it without a fuss from him.

But, Ezra's study wasn't merely academic. It was first of all devotional. He sought, first of all to let it affect his life. He "practiced" the law. That is, he put it into action. He was a doer of the word, and not a hearer only. Finally, he sought to use it to lead the people of God. He taught the

law of the LORD in Israel.

For anyone who is placed in a position of teaching, this is a great pattern to follow. Sunday school teachers, parents, pastors, small group leaders, or any who are in a discipling relationship with other people. Set your heart to study God's word. Practice what you learn. And then, and only then, teach it to others.

I believe that this is a large reason why "the good hand of his God was upon him" (7:9). See, God blesses those whose hearts are completely his (2 Chron. 16:9).. And the rest of chapter 7 is a testimony to God's blessing upon his life.

Ezra went to Jerusalem with the full blessing of the king. He was free to take as many people as wanted to go with him (7:13). He was bringing gifts of the king to help with the temple services in Jerusalem (7:16-18). He was given more than was needed to allocate as he deemed best (7:18). The king committed to give more out of the king's treasury if so needed (7:21-22). The operations of the temple was given a "tax free" status (7:24). (They were just like an official 401c3 non profit organization). Ezra was given freedom (by the king of Persia) to appoint the magistrates and judges in Jerusalem (7:25). Ezra was given the authority to rule over Jerusalem (7:26). He was offered troops and horsemen to protect them on the dangerous journey all the way to Jerusalem (8:22). In turn, Ezra blessed the Lord.

Ezra 7:27-28

Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Such is the life of Ezra. God's hand was upon him. He had the complete blessing of the king! He had a great following. You can see his following in chapter 8 in which the people who followed him from exile into Jerusalem are listed. Certainly, his arrival was a cause of celebration for all the people in the land, especially as they made the contributions from king Artaxerxes into the temple. All was good in Jerusalem, ... until Ezra had been in the land for about a week (I would guess). His honeymoon was over. It was then that he was told, ...

Ezra 9:1-2

"The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of 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 as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

Isn't this typical of the people of God? They are back in the land for some 50 years and already they have made a mess of their lives. They had not separated themselves from the people around them, as was clear in the law of Moses and in all of the prophets. This wasn't people sinning in ignorance. This is people sinning, thinking that their sin would be overlooked somehow. But, when Ezra found out about their sin, it gave him anguish of heart.

Ezra 9:3-4

When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

Perhaps Ezra had thought that the people in the land were living faithful lives. But, now he had discovered that they hadn't.

This reminds me of the time that Martin Luther made his trip to Rome in 1510. As a young monk, Martin Luther was eager to travel to Rome. To him, it was the great city. It was the glorious city, where Paul gave his life as a martyr for Christ. According to Catholic tradition, Peter had also been there as well. Rome was where the pope and all of his glorious cardinals lived. He walked 500 miles to get there, excited to see the city. Upon seeing the city, Martin Luther was appalled at the wickedness he found. The priests were irreverent. The saints were mocked. The sacrament of the Eucharist was a joke to many of the clergy. Blasphemy was rampant. Immorality reigned. He said, "The closer to Rome, the worse the Christians." He said, "If there is a hell, then Rome is build on it." Luther returned home a disillusioned monk.

In some sense, Ezra faced the same thing. Rather than seeing a pure people worshiping God as they ought, he found a wicked people, who had transgressed the law of Moses. After a time of mourning over the sin, he prayed.

Ezra 9:5-6

But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God; and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens."

And he goes on from there, reviewing Israel's past sins (9:7) and how God had demonstrated grace to Israel (9:8-9). He confessed their current sin and how they still had received grace (9:13), as God had still allowed the remnant to stand! The situation for Judah is well articulated in the last verse of Ezra's prayer.

Ezra 9:15

"O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

With these words, Ezra threw himself and those in Jerusalem upon the mercy of God. "We are before you in our guilt." This is where we are before God. We stand before Him in our guilt. He is righteous and we are not. Do you feel your guilt before a holy God? It is only His mercy in Jesus Christ that makes us able to stand before Him. It is only because Jesus died in our place that we can stand before God.

Ezra knew that the trouble that they were in because of their sin. These people new the trouble that they were in because of their sin.

Ezra 10:1

Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.

They felt their sin. Have you felt your sin? Have you felt your unrighteousness before God? In order to escape your sin, you need to feel your sin. Hope comes in verse 2, ...

Ezra 10:2

Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this."

What was their hope? They made a covenant with their God. What is our hope? Jesus Christ and the eternal covenant that God made with Him (Hebrews 13:20). Shecaniah continues, ...

Ezra 10:3

"So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act."

Chapter 10 of Ezra is all about how they put their wives away. Now, there are all kinds of questions about this chapter. To us it sounds strange. But, to the people of Israel, it wasn't. It sounds strange to us, because we live after the cross and are not Israelites. God had called the Jewish people to keep their nation pure. God had called them not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5). Because, as they would intermarry, they would inevitably follow after the false gods of the nations. For these people, their path to purity was to put away their wives. I don't believe that we should do this today. If you are married to an unbeliever, I do not believe that you should divorce them. Paul makes it clear that you shouldn't (1 Cor. 7). times have changed since Jesus came. We are the church, not Israel. But, these people did put away their wives.

Now, it's not that everybody had intermarried. There were some 50,000 Jews in the land at this time. Only 100 had taken foreign wives for themselves. You can read the list for yourselves in chapter 10.

What they did with their wives? I don't know. What they did with their children? I don't know. But, here's what I do know. They took radical action regarding their sin. That's a principle that I believe we can follow. This is what Jesus said, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you. ... If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you" (Matt. 5:29-30). And this is what they were doing, taking radical action for their sin, thereby demonstrating their repentance before the LORD.

That's the book of Ezra. Zerubbabel built the temple. Ezra taught the law and brought people back into spiritual reformation. And then, we come to look at Nehemiah, who built the wall.

3. Nehemiah

In the Hebrew text, the book of Ezra flows right into the book of Nehemiah without a break. Chronologically, there is a break between Ezra and Nehemiah of about 12 years. And with Nehemiah, we see the third wave of returnees to Jerusalem.

The first wave came with Zerubbabel. The second wave came with Ezra. And now, the third wave came with Nehemiah. With Nehemiah, there are much fewer people who came. With Zerubbabel came 42,360. With Ezra came a couple of thousand (is my best guess). With Nehemiah came only a few. Perhaps himself and a few others.

Nehemiah is a great example of a man who had a heart for his people. He was serving the king as a cupbearer in Susa, the capital of Persia. He happened upon a fellow Jew who had just come from Jerusalem. He asked how things were going in Jerusalem. They said ...

Nehemiah 1:3

The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.

Such news crushed Nehemiah. Verse 4 contains his reaction, ...

Nehemiah 1:4

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

The rest of chapter 1 is Nehemiah's prayer of repentance. For instance, he said in verse 7, ...

Nehemiah 1:7

We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

Nehemiah went on to claim the covenant that God had made with Moses and His people. He plead that God would be faithful to His people. Of anything that we ought to learn this week from the return from exile is repentance (i.e. sorrow for sin). Last week, we saw it in the book of Daniel (chapter 9). This week, we saw it in Ezra, chapter 9. It's here in Nehemiah, chapter 1. We will see it again in Nehemiah, chapter 9, when the people confess their sins.

This is what the exile was all about. It was to get Judah to deal with their sin. On four occasions, near the end of the exile, we see great confessions of sin. Perhaps in your life today there is sin that you have not confessed. Read Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9 to see what repentance looks like. See your sin! Deal with it! Confess it! Repent from it. Jesus came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). He calls us to repent and trust in him.

Time after time after time after time, this is how the people came to God near the end of the exile. They came in repentance. We can learn from their example. Let's be a church of repenters, who acknowledge our sin and plead the mercy of Jesus. It's the path to joy. It's the path to life. If there was hope for Israel, there is hope for us!

In chapter 2, we see Nehemiah and the king having a conversation. Nehemiah's face was sad because of the state of Jerusalem. The king noticed and said, ...

Nehemiah 2:2-6

"Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart."

Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

Then the king said to me, "What would you request?"

So I prayed to the God of heaven. I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

This sets up the entire book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with an aim on his mind. He wanted to build the wall and secure the gates, so that the people might dwell together in safety and security, that Jerusalem might prosper. The story of Nehemiah is a story of a man leading the people to do a difficult task, building the wall around Jerusalem.

In chapter 2, verse 9, he arrived in town. In chapter 2, verse 10, Nehemiah's enemies are listed: Sanballat and Tobiah. Much of the book is the battle between Nehemiah and these men. In chapter 2, Nehemiah surveys the walls and the gates. And then, he summoned the people to build the wall. He said, "Let us arise and build" (2:18).

Chapter 3 is a listing of those who worked on the wall and the gates of the city.

Chapter 4 is where the real battle took place between Sanballat and Tobiah and the Jews. There was so much hostility, that the Jews had to build with his sword at his side (Neh. 4:18). By the end of chapter 6, the wall is completed.

Nehemiah 6:15-16

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

Right there is the key to Nehemiah. The enemies of Israel had "recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (Neh. 6:16). And then, comes the great chapter, when Israel is all gathered together to hear from God, ...

Nehemiah 8:1-8

And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. He

read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating (or explaining) to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

Here we see the stage set for genuine reform. All are gathered together and the word is read and explained. This is expository preaching. Reading the text, explaining the text, illustrating the text, and applying the text. In the context of Nehemiah, it let the people to repentance (Nehemiah 9). The law showed them their sin and they repented. May this be your state today. May you repent of your sin and seek the LORD while He may be found.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 9, 2009 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] In this sermon series, we have been looking at 12 stages (or historical eras) of the Bible. The stages are Creation, Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest, Judges, Kingdom, Exile, Return, Silence, Gospel, Church and Missions. They come from the book, *30 Days to Understanding the Bible*, by Max Anders. It's an excellent book to help you grasp the main storyline of the Bible.

[2] This quote may be found here: http://www.sixdaywar.co.uk/news_articles-three-soldiers.htm. There is also a picture of these soldiers at the Wailing Wall at this link as well.

[3] As a footnote here, I want to add that the Persians were the ones who invented crucifixion. At this point in history, it was quite rudimentary. The victim would merely be impaled upon a tree. The death of the victim could have come quickly under the Persians. It was only when the Romans became involved that they learned how to invoke a slow death.