

# Return

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE

## Ezra: What Survives an Exile?

Ezra

Ray Anderson --- July 19, 2020

Well, good morning, Grace! I had certainly hoped that by the time I stepped into the pulpit for Matt that there would be more people in this room. But here we are: you and your living room couch and me speaking to a very big, very empty room.

I miss seeing you—certainly today, I miss seeing you. But the elders and pastors are the shepherds of this flock and we understand that we have responsibility to care for and protect the flock and keep it safe. We're getting the systems in place—actually, most of them are in place—for our return. But for now we want you to stay at home and stay safe and we will continue to pray for your well-being and for that time when we can return together on campus.

### Year of the Bible

We've been in a year-long walk through the Bible. We're actually in our last four weeks of the Old Testament sermon series. Today will look at the exile period and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

So, I thought it would be good if we had a review so we can get a sense of where we've been in the Old Testament and how the Old Testament concludes.

So, back in January we taught you forty words and phrases and forty hand signs as an overview of the Old Testament. So, I want to review those. So, I would like you to set aside your coffee, stand up and join me. I'll do it slowly at first so you can catch on and have your memories jogged.

Now I was trained to do the children's ministry version of this and it's all the same forty words and hand signs. But one of the directions of the Bible for the children--if they don't know their right from their left, it can actually be confusing.

So here we go. I'm going to raise my right hand. You stand up. Now I'm waiting for you to get off the couch and stand up. Stand up, put up your right hand. You'll notice my right hand is opposite yours as you view it on the screen. So, to help you out, I'm going to put a blue glove so that you know when my right hand goes up, that's your right hand which is really on this side of you as opposed to this side of me.

So, because there's a cadence between the right and the left hands that helps the hand signs actually flow together. So, we're going to start all the way down at the bottom with open palms, because God created all the world and all the natural things that we see from nothing. Here we go:

<b>Creation</b>	Fall	Flood	Nations
Abraham	Isaac	Jacob	Joseph

## **Moses**

Okay, you're doing great so far. Here we go:

Passover	Law	Tabernacle	
Offerings and Feasts	Counting - Spying		Wondering – Dying

Second Law

<b>Joshua</b>	Divide	Conquer	12 Tribes
Judges	Deborah	Gideon	Samson

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes, except Ruth and

<b>Samuel</b>	United Kingdom	Saul - No Heart
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David – Whole Heart	Solomon – Half Heart	
Divided Kingdom	Mostly Bad Kings	Prophets Speak
<b>Israel – Scattered</b>	Judah – Exiled	Judah – Returns
Zerubbabel – Temple	Esther- Queen	Ezra – People
Nehemiah – Wall	Wait	Christ

Good job! Let's try it again to get it back in your mind. And we'll use this today to be able to understand where we are. Start down here. Ready?

[Repeat the hand signs.]

Great! Good job. I'd encourage you to practice that this week. And if you would, video yourself or your family doing that and post it on our Facebook page for the church.

### Introduction

We're in the period of time called the exile and return. It is the point in our Old Testament story where the Jews of Judah were put into exile in Babylon for seventy years and God is going to bring them back to Jerusalem.

We're going to see how God sovereignly superintends this period of time. Many things come into place during this period of time that are in place when Jesus comes on the scene later.

During the exile—the reason they were exiled is that it was God's discipline upon them. He was spanking them for their idolatry. They had walked away from Him and they pursued after other gods. Their hearts had been led astray.

Usually that happened because of intermarrying with other people around them. The “badness” of the “**mostly bad kings**” in the Divided Kingdom period was really measured by how much they promoted idolatry to the people.

In 2014, Diana and I moved out of our house. We’d lived in that house for twenty-three years. It was a very interesting process because I had never lived in one place for that long. Our children had grown up in that house and they had all graduated from college and were off. What we had to do was decide what we were going to keep and what we were going to get rid of. In the attic we found the crib that our four children had slept in when they were infants. We had probably saved it for future grandchildren. But that model was probably recalled and was very dangerous, so it got tossed. Other things were carefully packed and moved to our new house.

You see, when you move somewhere, you have to make a decision about what you’re going to keep and what you’re going to get rid of and about what new things you need for this new home.

That’s similar to what’s going on with the Jews during this period of exile and return.

## What Survives This Exile Period?

I want to show you **five significant things God does** during the exile and return period of time, and those things will actually help you understand the New Testament period.

Three of those things are going to come into being during the exile period of time. The other two will happen because of the return. The fifth one of those is the most significant to us, and actually I think will relate to how we might emerge from this current pandemic season.

Let me talk about those things that came into being.

### 1. Synagogue System

The first one of those was the whole **synagogue system of worship**. Solomon’s Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. So, with no temple there was no sacrificial system of worship.

The Judean Jews were carried off to Babylon and they had to figure out a new strategy to identity and cultivate their relationship with God. Worship was moving from the temple in Jerusalem to congregational instruction through teachers in local communities.

It was the synagogue system. Synagogue services included prayer, the reading of Scripture and usually a sermon explaining the Scripture. Does that sound familiar? Worship shifted from a single place of worship at the Temple, to wherever a group of people gathered to worship, pray and learn.

What had been inaccessible to the average person, a local place for regular worship and instruction from the Law, was now accessible to each community of Jews. Synagogues were open to men, women and even gentiles. The Jews take this system of synagogues and take it back with them from exile back to the Promised Land, even though temple worship is going to be restored.

We see it in Jesus' day. Jesus goes to the synagogues and teaches in them. The apostles do as they go around the Roman Empire. So, one of the things that God used this exile period of time for is to develop the synagogue system.

## **2. Teachers, Not Priests**

A second that kind of went along with it was a group of teachers. Now these weren't priests. These were a group of people that became students of the Law of Moses. And they desired to teach the Jews how to follow that law. It was these teachers that used the synagogue system to teach and instruct. We're going to see later that Ezra was one of these teachers of the Law. Many times in Jesus' ministry you'll hear of these teachers of the Law taking issue with Him over His words or His miracles.

## **3. Samaritans**

So, you had the synagogue system, this group of teachers that had emerged. The third was a group of people called the Samaritans. During that exile period of time, the Israelites that didn't go off to exile in Babylon stayed there and intermarried with the people around them. They became known as Samaritans because the capital city of the province was relocated to

Samaria, because Jerusalem was destroyed. When the Jews returned from exile the Samaritan power in the region is challenged, is threatened.

In each of the three returns you will read of the antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans. That continues throughout Jesus' lifetime even. Think of the woman at the well. She was a Samaritan and Jesus dared to talk to her. Or the story about the good Samaritan.

## 4. Temple Worship

So you had the synagogue system, the teachers, the Samaritans—those occurred during the exile period of time. The fourth thing is temple worship. It was restored during the return period of time. Through the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra, and a priest named Jeshua, all the elements of Temple worship are going to be put back in place. This guy named Jeshua is going to be affirmed by the prophet Zecharias in that he is in the line of the priesthood of Aaron. They're going to establish all the things that were part of temple worship:

### **Passover – Law – Temple (instead of Tabernacle)– Offerings & Feasts**

All those things are going to be put back into place during this return period of time. So those four things—the synagogues, the teachers, the Samaritans, and temple worship—all came about because of this exile and return period of time. They're all going to come into play in Jesus' ministry later. And this is an expression of God's sovereignty.

Remember how Matt has taught us what sovereignty is? It's having a plan along with the power to accomplish that. God is sovereign. And in that sovereignty, He's going to orchestrate three groups of Jews to return to Jerusalem.

## The Return

God promises the Judean Jews that their exile would last seventy years. God is going to use the prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah to tell the Jews a hundred years or more before they go into exile—before there's a nation of Babylon or a King Cyrus or Xerxes. Their exile is going to

last seventy years. Here is a good example of it, because He wants them to know that He has a plan and He has the power to execute that plan.

In Jeremiah 29 starting in verse 10, we read this. Some of you will be familiar with this passage.

**“This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.**

**<sup>11</sup> ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**

**<sup>12</sup> ‘Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back from captivity.**

**“ ‘I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.’”**

Did you catch that last phrase: **“from which I carried you into exile.”** Babylon didn’t carry Judah into exile, God did. He was exercising His sovereignty to execute His plan. God was going to make a provision to preserve what was important to Him. His sovereignty is Him having the plan and power to execute that.

God’s sovereignty is on plain display during this whole period of time.

Now in the Hebrew text the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. Together they describe three groups that return to Jerusalem from exile. Each group accomplishes a task, a very specific thing.

The three journeys will take place over a one hundred-year period of time. That journey is about nine hundred miles and takes about four months to accomplish.

Together these three journeys, these three returns, will re-establish Judah’s connection to God, to the land, and to their heritage.

## First Return under Zerubbabel

The first return: in the first six chapters of Ezra, we read about this first expedition. It is led by a man named Zerubbabel and a priest named Jeshua. About 50,000 Jews—so it's a large caravan—will return to Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel's goal is to rebuild the Temple, to rebuild the altar and to reinstate the sacrificial system of worship.

It's during this time period, when they're doing that in Jerusalem, that back over here in Babylon the story of Esther takes place. So, when King Xerxes issues a decree to all the provinces of his empire that on a certain date all the Jews can be killed, that decree would have been read over in Jerusalem in the hearing of these 50,000 Jews that were rebuilding the Temple. That probably would have been read by the provincial leaders, the Samaritans.

And God is going to use this time to show that He is sovereign. So, the story of Esther protects this group of people. It also sets up the next returns with Ezra and Nehemiah. That's the first return.

## Second Return under Ezra

The second return is with Ezra. It occurs about eighty years after that first group goes back. Ezra will lead about two thousand Jews back.

We get an introduction to Ezra, this man, in chapter 7. In verse 10 it says this:

**“For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”**

Ezra's goal was to restore the people's obedience to God. He's going to use four times in this chapter a version of the phrase, **“For the hand of the Lord his God was on him.”** Because he wants us to read centuries later that he understood it wasn't him doing this work. It was God doing it. It was the sovereign God accomplishing His plan by using His power.

The Jews could have confidence in going forward because they could see that God was accomplishing His plan and they were just a part of it. If this was His plan, then He certainly had the power to accomplish it. That's the second return.



## Third Return under Nehemiah

The third return happens ten to twenty years after Ezra and is led by Nehemiah. Nehemiah will rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Matt will share more about that next week.

## Summary of the Three Returns

These three returns from the exile in Babylon occur over a one hundred-year period of time. And they accomplish the things that God wants to accomplish: Zerubbabel (the Temple), Esther the Queen, Ezra (the people), Nehemiah (the wall).

**Zerubbabel - Temple**

**Esther – Queen**

**Ezra - People**

**Nehemiah - Walls.**

The sovereign God was accomplishing His purposes to preserve what was important to Him.

So now we've seen thus far that God uses this period of the exile and the returns to set up the **synagogue** worship along with **teachers**, the people group of the **Samaritans**. And now **temple worship** is restored.

And God is going to continue to accomplish what is most important to Him. And you would think that He's done that thus far if, what was most important to Him was restoring the temple and temple worship; if having a set of teachers and synagogues to instruct people; observing the Passover, the priesthood, or offerings and feasts.

But we're going to see now surface in this whole situation in Jerusalem a problem that comes to light. And it's through that problem that we're going to see what was most important to God in these returns and what He wanted to see happen as a result of this period in their history.

## **The Problem that Ezra Faces**

In Ezra chapter 9 it is brought to Ezra's attention that the people that had returned with Zerubbabel and him had begun to intermarry with the people around them.

Ezra has this major reaction to that. He tears his tunic and his cloak, he pulls his hair out of his head, he pulls hair out of his beard, all acts of self-abasement. He feels the weight of the guilt and shame, that this is what is going on.

What's the big deal? It's idolatry. Their forefathers had gotten into idolatry through intermarriage. That is what turned their hearts away from God in the first place. That's why they were sent into exile. See, idolatry was threatening to undo everything that Ezra has tried to restore. And he gets angry and upset.

## **Dealing with a Bad Heart**

Idolatry is a condition of the heart. What God wants more than a temple worship or sacrifices or offerings and feasts is a people whose hearts are fully devoted to Him. Idolatry is a condition that shows a person's heart isn't right with God.

As I have gotten older my regular doctor has started sending me to a cardiologist for an annual checkup. The cardiologist checks the condition of my heart by listening to it, by doing tests, a CT scan or an echocardiogram.

See, he wants to learn some things about the condition of my heart: Is there any plaque buildup in the arteries that can lead to a heart attack someday? Are the valves functioning the way that they're supposed to? Has there been any change in the functioning of my heart compared to my last checkup? Now it's very encouraging to me to get the follow-up feedback from him that my heart is in good condition. I get a good report. I don't necessarily like when he adds the statement at the end of that report by saying, "for your age."

In this situation after all the work has been done to set up the systems to restore people to honor their God again so that they will learn something from the exile period, things begin to unravel. Ezra is shocked and dismayed when he discovers a heart condition in the people.

But God is not surprised by that condition. In His sovereignty, He has been dealing with man's heart condition since the garden of Eden. He has made provision for that as part of His plan. Ultimately, Jesus will fix the root cause of our heart condition and restore us into right

relationship. But even in this point in God's plan He has a provision for this problem in the heart of men.

## 5. The Remnant

In chapter 9, Ezra records his prayer of confession before God. In that prayer of confession, he's going to reference four times a group of faithful followers. He's going to call them "the remnant." Let's look at the last part of his prayer of confession in Ezra chapter 9.

**<sup>13</sup>“What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this.**

**<sup>14</sup>“Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?**

**<sup>15</sup>“Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.”**

The remnant—see, the fifth significant thing that comes from this exile/return period is the remnant. A remnant is a group of people that show they are faithful to God even through a disaster; a group of people who hold to being faithful to God even in the midst of a disaster or a catastrophe. See, failure of the larger body doesn't impair God's purposes.

Ezra's appeal to God is not, *Look at all the good works we've done for you, look at this--the temple, the priest, the Law, the offerings and feasts*. Ezra's appeal to God is to preserve a remnant of faithful men and women who will show their love for God by obedience to His Word.

The sovereign God is going to accomplish His purposes. He's going to preserve what is most important to Him. What has been and always will be most important to Him is to preserve a remnant, a group of people who will remain faithful followers, even if others turn away from God.

God is always continuing to do this: preserve a group of people who choose to come under His lordship, a group of followers that don't bow their knees to other gods, people that don't get shipwrecked along the way.

As we learned in our walk through the Bible, most every name that we learned in those forty phrases were people that God has used through the history of Israel to preserve a remnant, faithful followers of His, even though the rest of the people fell away.

In Romans chapter 11, Paul picks up on this same concept. In verse 5 he says this. **“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”** Paul understood what God's work was, that God was going to reserve a remnant.

And He has to do that because He made promises. He made promises to Abraham and He's made promises to David. He has to preserve the line of Judah because the Christ will come from the line of Judah. God is preserving what's most important to Him: a group of people who are faithful followers even in the midst of disaster. And He does it to fulfill His promises.

God promises humanity in the garden that there will be a Savior. Preserving a remnant throughout history is what God does to fulfill His promises no matter how dark the world gets.

There will emerge from that chaos a remnant.

## Application

What's our application for today? I have seen lots of people start off the Christian journey really very, very well. They start with great zeal for the Lord. There is a season of passion and devotion, and then something comes along and begins to distract them.

- It can be fatigue because the journey is just long.
- It's harder than you think to walk with God for the rest of your life.
- It's easy to get drawn away by other relationships, a spouse, children or friends that lead you away from Christ, rather than you leading them to Christ.
- It's the pull of a career or personal accomplishments.
- It's the rut of daily life.
- People get stuck at a wall and they stay stuck there.
- There are casualties along the way in this journey of life.

But God is always using His sovereignty with His plan and His power to preserve a remnant of faithful followers.

There are lots of characteristics of this group called “the remnant.” But let me point out three particular characteristics that I think would be helpful for us. The remnant, the people who choose to show themselves faithful to God, choose to:

- 1) **Love** - They love God more than this life.
- 2) **They choose to be obedient** - They want to show their love for God through their obedience. They want to understand His words so that they can follow it.
- 3) **And they choose to serve** – They see themselves playing the part in God’s story to build His kingdom. They choose to step into that story and serve God to help build this kingdom.

Now we use a different term around here at Grace for this group called “the remnant.” It’s called a disciple. It’s a person who wants to become like Christ in all of life.

See, because Jesus modeled these three particular characteristics:

- 1) **He loved the Father more than this life.**
- 2) **He showed His love for the Father by His obedience.**
- 3) **He was willing to serve the Father’s purposes in order to build the kingdom, even if that meant going to the cross and dying.**

## Epilogue

During this exile period the Jews had to make some major adjustments.

- They were cut off from their normal system of worship at the temple.
- They created a whole new system to encourage their personal walks with God.

- They made adjustments for how to live in a hostile environment and how to go beyond just living, but to thrive personally in that environment.

Does this all sound familiar?

- Many people died in exile because they fail to make those adjustments. Many Jews chose not to come back.
- Others thrived and they prepared themselves for the return.

**What if the turmoil of our world and in our country right now is our exile?**

- It's time for us to quit asking God to align with our plans and to ask His help for us to align with His plans.
- It's time for us to recognize His sovereignty. He is in control. He takes us to this place and He has the power to get us through it.

Our normal lives are interrupted. But **what if a sovereign God was engineering all of this** so that we would address what is most important to Him--**our heart**? Our heart condition, the state of our heart.

**Our Return**

Grace, at some point we're going to re-gather onto this campus and we will worship again, and we will fellowship again, and we will minister face to face.

We will gather in this room again and we will sing unmasked to the glory of our God. We will rejoice over the lives that were spared from this illness. We will mourn over those that are lost. We will continue to hear from this pulpit the Word of God preached.

**But what is most important, or more important than you bringing your body back on this campus, is for you to bring back a heart that is fully devoted to God.**

You don't have to be here on Sunday morning to do that.

- You can cultivate that through private worship in your home as a family.

- You can read God’s Word daily. We’re about to start in the New Testament—start there.
- You can praise more and you can pray more and you can whine less.

You can devote yourself to cultivating a healthy heart.

So, let’s prepare ourselves for that day of return by surrendering our hearts to Him.

Make the adjustments you need to make to in order to love Him:

- Choose to love Him more than life itself.
- In order to choose to learn His Word so that you can obey it.
- In order to choose to play a part of serving in His kingdom.

Choose to cultivate your heart for the living God.

When we come back, there’s going to be a lot of work to get back to where we were before we separated months ago. But the most important work that needs to happen can happen now. It’s in our individual hearts to point toward the Lord.

Would you join me in prayer?

*Father, we stand before You, we kneel before You and sit before You as our living God. You are sovereign and You are in control. It will be written that You led us to this period of time of worldwide pandemic and social turmoil. And in Your sovereignty and Your power You will lead us through it. And You will preserve in us a people whose hearts are fully devoted to You. Lord, let that be the people of Grace.*

*Father, we surrender ourselves to You and the uncertainty of our time; but there’s no uncertainty with You. So, we entrust ourselves to You. Help us, guide us, lead us, direct us. Father, we particularly today surrender to You our youth who are going to camp. We pray that You would protect and preserve them and that You would stir at their young age a heart that’s fully devoted to You, one that loves You, that wants to learn so they choose to obey, and who wants to serve and build Your kingdom for future generations.*

*Father, our hope can be only placed in one place. That is in a sovereign God who's going to preserve what's most important to You. We pray in the name of our great Savior Jesus. Amen.*

It's good to be with you today, Grace, even though it's at a distance. I'm praying for you, for our well-being, and for our return.