

MEMOIRS OF THE
WAY HOME

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Ezra and Nehemiah as a Call to Conversion

Gerald M. Bilkes



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For my father and mother,
with love

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*In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD,
the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together,
going and weeping; they shall go, and seek the LORD their God.
They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying,
Come, and let us join ourselves to the LORD
in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.*

—JEREMIAH 50:4–5

INTRODUCTION

The year is 538 BC, and the Persian king, Cyrus, has just issued a proclamation that the Jewish exiles can return home. All throughout the Jewish settlements, the word spreads: “We can return home! We are free to go! The prophets were right. God has opened the prison doors of exile.” For the next hundred years, waves of journeying groups travel the dusty roads from Babylon and Persia back to Judah. How would you like to be able to read some memoirs written by someone taking that journey?

We have not just one person’s memoirs from this time, but two. Both Ezra and Nehemiah wrote down in first-person form what they saw, felt, and experienced as they left exile and came back to the Promised Land. No wonder the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have such an up-close and personal feel to them. Ezra was a scribe, living daily in the world of letters, words, and sentences, and handled the writings of Moses and the prophets preserved from former times. Nehemiah was a king’s cupbearer, working in the world of royal influence and intrigue. Both of them put pen to paper to give

us eyewitness accounts that involve anguish and adventure. And, best of all, it is inspired Scripture.

The Way Home

For the most part, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not the records of great heroic feats. They read more like the confessions of a humbled prodigal and bear an uncanny resemblance to the experiences of the younger son in Christ's parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), traveling as he does from the far country back to the father's house. In many ways, the narratives in Ezra and Nehemiah read like an extended account of the prodigal's way back home. This journey has different phases, occurring over nearly a century. Yet through it all, it is foundationally a journey from misery to joy, from sadness to gladness, from captivity to service.

The Far Country of Exile

The exile had been punishment for a nation's sin, but it was more than that. When the nation of Israel (722 BC) and then the nation of Judah (587 BC) were led away into exile, the people were deported to the very countries whose idols they had worshiped. You could put it this way: As Israel pursued the idols of the nations, first their hearts journeyed into the far country. In exile, the rest of them followed. Early on, in their Father's house in Canaan, the people enjoyed life and communion with their God, especially during the days of Joshua and then later under David. But they repeatedly yearned after the gods of the surrounding nations and their way of life. Israel proved that it was bent on turning from

the Lord's way. The people wasted their God-given gifts on false gods—idols that could be seen, handled, and manipulated. These idols promised happiness and success, though in the end they impoverished this pleasure-seeking nation and enslaved the people to cruel taskmasters.

Just as the prodigal son began to be in want (Luke 15:14–15), so, too, Israel found itself “in great distress” (Neh. 9:37), slaving away for others. As a nation, it had joined itself to strangers, and now it was at the mercy of foreign lords. In Nehemiah, we read this sad lament: “Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it” (9:36).

In Ezra and Nehemiah, we watch these prodigal people as they return home. In the deepest sense, this return wasn't about the actual march from Babylon to Judah, though that certainly gave concrete shape to it. The real journey home was much longer and far deeper. It was a profoundly spiritual journey. It involved confession of sin and separation from former loves. The process included steps forward and backward. But as is always the case in true conversion, the Father's drawing love prevailed over His people's wayward hearts.

A Century of Returning to the Land

Some debate exists as to the exact chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah. The following is the most commonly accepted chronology of the events in these books.

Historical Review (Ezra 1–6): In 538 BC, Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. Those who did

return took up the task of rebuilding. After some setbacks, the temple was finished in 515 BC.

Ezra's Memoirs (Ezra 7–10): In 458 BC, Ezra returned with a fresh wave of Jews to beautify the temple and teach the law of Moses in Jerusalem. He discovered a situation that was profoundly compromised and led the people in a national confession of sin.

Nehemiah's Memoirs (Nehemiah 1–13): In 445 BC, Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. The king allowed him to return to rebuild them. When that work was completed, Ezra read the law to the people, and under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people made a covenant with God. The book ends with great rejoicing (chapter 12), though Nehemiah later returned to make further reforms (chapter 13).

A Call to Us Today

When you examine these writings, you realize they are exceedingly relevant in light of the situation of many people today, especially those in the Western world. Essentially, these memoirs pose a challenge to us. Are we in the far country, or are we, by grace, on our way back home to God?

Like the prodigal, many of us once enjoyed innumerable spiritual privileges. We lived in the “Father’s house” of biblical and evangelical truth. In general, however, the great Protestant churches of the Reformation have sold themselves into a new Babylonian captivity of sorts. The church of Christ has sold out to worldly thinking, material possessions, the pursuit

of pleasure, and other idols. In most cases, we have not simply *lost* our heritage, but we have eagerly *left* our heritage.

Like Israel before its exile, we have cast a desiring look at the world around us. What we have seen has made us want to explore what the world has to offer. As a result, many prodigal sons of today have sold out to the “pig farmers” of our culture. At their mercy, we feed on the husks of entertainment, pleasure, and a worldly gospel. All the while, whether we realize it or not, our souls are more famished than ever.

“Turn Us, O God”

Even though the professing church of God finds itself, like Israel, in a sad and dilapidated condition, there are those today who, like Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, long to see it restored to its former glory. Psalm 102:14 describes people who “take pleasure in [Zion’s] stones, and favour the dust thereof.” They are elsewhere called “God’s remnant.” Isaiah says, “Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah” (1:9). God has promised to leave such a remnant in every time. The Lord says in Zephaniah 3:12, “I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD” (see 1 Kings 19:18; Rom. 11:4–5).

In times of spiritual decline, such people long for tokens of the Lord’s mercy. They desire it just as people long for spring after a long, hard winter. They yearn for it like prisoners waiting for the day when they will be free again. These longings well up deep within believers’ hearts and are breathed out in prayer. We read of these deep, heartfelt

prayers in Scripture: “Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south” (Ps. 126:4). “Let the sighing of the prisoner come before thee; according to the greatness of thy power preserve thou those that are appointed to die” (Ps. 79:11). “Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved” (Ps. 80:7). “Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil” (Ps. 90:15). These are pleas for the Lord to return and have mercy on His church.

“Turn Ye to Me”

The Lord’s call to His people today is exactly the same as it was to wayward Israel: “Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 1:3). Nehemiah echoed this in his prayer to the Lord: “But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there” (1:9). And so it is God’s call that effects the return of the people to Jerusalem and Judah in Ezra and Nehemiah. The call is reiterated in the opening verses of Ezra: “Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD” (1:3).

While Cyrus actually is the one speaking these words, we need to see the Lord behind him, drawing the people back to Himself, and as the father in the parable of the prodigal son, gazing into the distance when the prodigal “was yet a great way off” (Luke 15:20). Have you ever wondered what

motivated this younger son to return home? It was not only the desperate circumstances in which he found himself but also his father's loving heart. We read that when the son "came to himself," he thought about the things that his father's servants enjoyed (Luke 15:17). Under such a kind and compassionate master, these servants lived a good life. If his father was such a loving master, wasn't he worth returning to? And so this son's thoughts of his father's love drew him home.

So, too, God's love draws His people back to Him. It was not in Israel's power to turn to the Lord any more than it was in the prodigal's power to turn himself back to his father. Consider what the father says about his son after his return: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24). He refers to his son as dead! Something that is not living is not capable of action; by implication, then, the son would never have come back on his own. In Luke 15, Christ tells two other stories in connection with the prodigal son that underscore the point. A shepherd went looking for his lost sheep, and a woman swept and searched diligently for her lost coin. Neither a lost sheep nor a lost coin would find its way back to its owner by itself. And so the prodigal, too, was searched out and drawn home by a father's heart of love.

This corresponds well with the Bible's teaching about repentance. Nowhere in Scripture are we taught that we repent and return to God through the exercise of our free will. By our fall into sin, our wills have become enslaved to sin and the devil. We do not want to return to God. Jesus said to those who rejected Him: "And ye will not come to

me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40). Without the work of God the Holy Spirit in their hearts, sinners will not turn to the Lord. They need the Lord to "give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Tim. 2:25–26; see also Acts 5:31).

What are you to do when you find yourself in the "pigsty" of your own captivity? What are you to do when you find yourself tethered to the dictates of a godless culture, finding no real satisfaction in life? The answers to these questions are found in Ezra and Nehemiah. There we read the call, promise, and life of conversion in the memoirs of a prodigal people returning to their God.

Questions

1. What are some good reasons to keep a diary or write down some of the mercies of God in our lives?
2. Give some examples of prodigals in the Bible. How common is it to read of people returning from "far countries" back to the God who calls them?
3. Why do you think the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are in the Bible?
4. Why don't these books celebrate Ezra and Nehemiah? Whom do they celebrate?
5. Why should we cry to God to turn us?

THE LORD IS FIRST

Ezra 1:1-4

The first four verses of Ezra are so important that they are the focus of our entire first chapter. They show that everything good starts with God. The subject of the first sentence of Ezra is the Lord God. According to the first verse, “the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” to make a proclamation. In verse 5 (which we will cover in the next chapter), we will see how He also stirred the spirit of the people to return. The point clearly is this: God is first in the process of turning lost sinners back to Himself.

Advance Notice

A thousand years before the first chapter of Ezra, during the time of Moses, God told the people that He would be first in their restoration and repentance. Back in Deuteronomy, the Lord made very clear to the people of Israel how true repentance happens. He warned them that they would fall into idolatry, bringing on themselves punishment as a result. His servant Moses warned them where their prodigal hearts would take them: “The LORD shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the

heathen, whither the LORD shall lead you. And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell" (Deut. 4:27–28). This is precisely what happened. As a punishment for Israel's sins, the Lord did scatter them among the nations. However, Moses also told them: "When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he sware unto them" (Deut. 4:30–31). In other words, almost a thousand years before it happened, the nation's repentance was foretold! Note these important words: "For the LORD thy God is a merciful God." God's mercy would bring the people to repentance and draw them back to Him. He would be the first to act; they would act in response.

What was true for Israel is also true for us. Behind every true conversion is the mercy of God. The Lord does not wait for us to initiate a return to Him—we take a few steps toward Him, and then He brings us the rest of the way. No, the Lord is "the first" (Isa. 44:6). His mercy is the only explanation for anyone's repentance. Let's see how this truth unfolds in the first four verses of the book of Ezra. Prodigal Israel will return home to its God only because He is acting powerfully, in accordance with His own promise.

He Speaks

In 538 BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, had defeated the Babylonian army and taken the city of Babylon. Before the rise of Persia,

Babylon, an old Assyrian province, was the sovereign power; this was the nation that had cast Judah into exile. Now Cyrus controlled the entire eastern part of the known world.

Impressive as Cyrus's accomplishments were, they are not the highlights of the book of Ezra. The author looks beyond this worldly king's work to the work of the Lord—the true and only Sovereign. According to the first verse of Ezra, “The *LORD* stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (emphasis added). Truly, “the king's heart is in the hand of the *LORD*” (Prov. 21:1). Cyrus may have thought he was directing affairs to his own advantage. Instead, the great King of heaven was directing the heart of Cyrus in order to fulfill His own purposes.

The sovereign Lord is a faithful Lord. He is faithful to His word. The book of Ezra makes this point at the outset: “that the word of the *LORD*...might be fulfilled” (v. 1). The Lord had spoken, promising through the prophet Jeremiah that the exile would last for only seventy years (Jer. 29:10). He had also promised that He would raise up Cyrus to bring His people home (Isa. 44:23–45:6). Now the Lord was acting to fulfill these promises.

Cyrus's official edict is recorded for us in verses 2–4. An edict is a royal proclamation announced by official messengers. It was probably carried to various cities of importance in order to reveal the king's will throughout his vast empire. Certainly, word must have reached the captive people of Israel. Perhaps they said to one another, “Did you hear the news? King Cyrus is allowing us to go back to our own land.”

Certainly, this happy news should have melted their hearts. As they heard it, they had reason to remember that

God's word through His prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah was coming to fulfillment. What an amazing God the Lord was! They had deserved their captivity, for they had abandoned God. Though they had broken all their promises, the Lord was faithful to His word. Despite their faithlessness, God was proving Himself to be a faithful God and Redeemer.

He Acts

Notice the wording that Cyrus used in verse 2: "The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." Cyrus's positive reference to the Lord does not mean that he knew Him in a saving relationship. He was not doing something entirely unique for the Jews here; historical records tell us that he took similar action on other occasions for other groups of people. Notice also that when Cyrus referred to God, he wrote: "*His God be with him*" (v. 3, emphasis added). Further on, the same verse literally says, "*He is the God...which is in Jerusalem*" (emphasis added). In both these instances Cyrus stopped short of calling God his God, and he did not see God as the only God of the world. Rather, he referred to God as the God of the Jews, limited in influence to the city of Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, although Cyrus did not have a personal faith in the Jews' God, he did at least openly and publicly acknowledge Him. How convicting this is to us who so often fail to acknowledge the Lord openly. We are so afraid of what people around us might think. But those who profess to be God's people should not be ashamed to acknowledge Him, even when the world around us finds it unpalatable. Perhaps

it is part of the church's backslidden condition that we do not speak more openly and fearlessly about the Lord. Indeed, if we were to speak more openly of Him, we might be exposed to subtle or even overt persecution. But we would also enjoy more of a sense of the Lord's favor if we feared Him more than we fear the people around us (Acts 4:29–31).

Many people today, like Cyrus, will allow for the God of the Bible to be *a* God, but not the *only* God. People sometimes speak of the "Christian" God, as if there are many gods and many ways to heaven. We live in what some call post-modern times, in which people think we need to tolerate all kinds of worldviews, even if they contradict each other. We should resist being a part of this postmodern chorus, even if we think it may serve us well in this world. As people who have been freed by God, we ought to unashamedly take our direction from God's Word, which says, "Say among the heathen that the LORD reigneth" (Ps. 96:10).

Still today, the faithful Lord is overturning kingdoms and establishing governments, all in accordance with His will (Dan. 2:21). As we see God's work in our day, we should remember Christ's words: "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). God Himself is in all the events of our time. He is acting to bring all things to their culmination—the redemption of His people and the full ushering in of His kingdom.

He Calls

The king's edict called the Lord's people to identify themselves: "Who is there among you of all his people?" (v. 3).

Imagine Cyrus's messenger reading this edict in public squares or posting it on city gates throughout the region. Imagine the word spreading: "Can you believe it? The king is looking for the people who call themselves by the name of the LORD!" For a moment, King Cyrus acted as the Lord's mouthpiece, calling His exiled people home.

It's important to remember from what circumstances God's people were being called home. Their captivity hadn't just come upon them through some unfortunate political situation. This was the punishment they had brought on themselves. It was God's covenantal discipline as a result of their sin—the curses of the law and the judgments of the prophets had come upon them. Remember, these events had been foretold! And so, in a way, we could say these people had chosen exile, like the prodigal in Christ's parable. Their wayward hearts had become infatuated with the idols of the surrounding nations. How fitting a punishment their exile really was! By going after heathen gods, they brought themselves exile in a heathen land—and no gods could deliver them from that. Only their God could.

Some of these captives surely understood this. For instance, Daniel's prayer shows that he was conscious of the cause of the people's punishment—namely, sin. He confessed:

Neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him (9:10–11).

Another example is Nehemiah, who acknowledged:

We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there (1:7–9).

People who shared Daniel's and Nehemiah's repentant spirit would have much cause for thanksgiving because of Cyrus's edict. God's faithfulness was so evident in this good news! Here was a way of escape from the punishment they had brought on themselves. What a covenant-keeping God was theirs!

Other Jews, however, saw things differently. They had enjoyed blending into the heathen culture around them. They didn't see their new life in Babylon as bondage. They felt no inclination to answer Cyrus's call: "Who is there among you of all his people?" (v. 3). Something held them back, even though many of their fellow Jews were packing their few belongings in preparation for the trip home.

Isn't this how many people today respond to the gospel call? They may hear that they are sinners in bondage who need repentance. They may hear the gracious gospel promises of God. But, at the end of the day, they go on living as they have always lived. They do not respond to God's call

because they can still make ends meet on their own. The love of a covenant-keeping God has not conquered their hearts, so they remain willingly in the bondage of sin and death.

He Draws

God was using Cyrus to draw these prodigal people home. Cyrus's pronouncement included the amazing phrase "his God be with him" (v. 3). For a prodigal people who return to the Lord, it is a miracle that God is their God and that He is with them. They know they don't deserve it, but there is always some "apprehension of God's mercy" in true repentance, as the Westminster Larger Catechism says so well:

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the *apprehension of God's mercy* in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience (emphasis added).

Notice the next part of Cyrus's pronouncement: "His God be with him, and let him *go up*" (v. 3, emphasis added). The Hebrew verb here is specific; in contrast to other verbs that might signify going down or going straight, this word means going up and was often used to describe going to worship. In other words, Cyrus was suggesting that there was something sacred about this journey home. The exile had been a low point in the Jews' history, but now God was drawing His people up from the depths of their captivity.

He Employs

The land of Judah, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple were in complete ruins. Their stones were thrown down and ground to dust. The land lay in a winter of desolation. But the returning prodigals loved these ruined stones; they felt drawn to the dust (see Ps. 102:14). Seeing the Lord's house in such a state, they were motivated to rebuild it in the hope that it would achieve its former glory. They would rather spend one day in the ruined courts of the Lord than a thousand in Babylon. Attending to the Lord's house and service was their delight because it meant being with the God of the universe. In calling His people back, God was turning captives into builders. Even now, Cyrus's edict made provision for them—with silver, gold, goods, beasts, and freewill offerings (v. 4). This, too, was a confirmation of God's word. As Isaiah had prophesied, "Ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves" (61:6; see also 60:15–17).

And so it is today. Whenever God works in His grace, He takes those in captivity to sin and frees them by Christ's Spirit. He brings them back to His house, and He provides for their every need. His promises are all fulfilled. Truly, He is both first and last!

Questions

1. Read the Lord's promise in Isaiah 44:24–28. How was He fulfilling this promise in Ezra 1?
2. We are often surprised when the Lord does what He has promised. What does that say about us?

3. Why is there no true repentance without a sense of God's mercy?
4. The Bible speaks of Cyrus as the Lord's servant. We know that Christ was the ultimate and perfect Servant of the Lord. He also proclaimed an edict to His people after He had won the greatest victory, and we find it in Matthew 28:18–20. What similarities and differences are there between Cyrus's and Christ's edicts?
5. In Ezra 1, Cyrus acknowledged that the Lord had given him all the kingdoms of the earth (v. 2). Compare this with Revelation 11:15. How should we understand this? What implications should this have for our view of this world?
6. To start a journey back to Jerusalem in Ezra's time would not have been easy. A traveler then would have to dare to be different and could also expect many dangers. How do these realities carry over into the journey of a life of repentance?