

EZRA: THE WAY BACK

by Ray C. Stedman

The books of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah cover the historical period of Israel's captivity in Babylon and the period immediately following their return to Jerusalem. Israel's return to Jerusalem from Babylon involved about fifty thousand Jews -- much, much fewer than the more recent return, which is such a wonder of our own day. The biblical record accords great importance to this return.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. I am convinced that the events of these two books run parallel to one another, a point of view which is a departure from the traditional view. Most commentators on the Scripture say that Nehemiah follows Ezra chronologically, but I believe that a careful study of these two books will indicate that the events covered by them were concurrent. Ezra is concerned with the building of the temple. Nehemiah is concerned with the building of the city and walls of Jerusalem. Now, the temple was the last thing to be destroyed when the nation fell into captivity. It was the last holdout, if we may put it that way, of the Spirit of God. It is the last place (the temple representing the spirit) to be destroyed in an individual's failure to relate to his God. The temple is also the first place where God begins to set about the work of restoration; and therefore the book of Ezra, which deals with restoring the temple, is placed first in the Scriptures. Notice the opening words of this book:

**In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.
{Ezra 1:1 RSV}**

Now look at 2 Chronicles 36:22:

**Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:
{2 Chr 36:22 RSV}**

The same words exactly! The book of Ezra begins right where Chronicles leaves off. This is one reason why it is felt that Ezra wrote both books. Ezra hence becomes a picture for us of the work of God in the restoration of a heart that has fallen into sin. Restoration can be on an individual basis. It can be on a local church basis, or on the part of any of the great God-honored denominations of our day. It can be the work of God in a nation, bringing it back from secularism and materialism to true spiritual knowledge and strength. In any case, it always follows the pattern depicted here in the book of Ezra. This is the picture of how God works when he sets about to restore the heart that has fallen into sin.

The book divides very naturally in line with the ministries of two men: Zerubbabel, in chapters 1 through 6; and Ezra, in chapters 7 through 10. Both of these men led the captives of Babylon back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, interestingly enough, was a descendant of David. He is of the kingly line. Ezra, descended from Aaron the priest, is likewise a priest. Clearly outlined here is the need for the work both of the king and of the priest in accomplishing restoration. The work of the king is to build or, in this case, to rebuild. The work of the priest is to cleanse. Both are essential in the work of restoring someone who has fallen into a sinful state.

Restoration in the individual life involves rebuilding the control of the Spirit of God through obedience to the kingship and lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus, it involves his ministry as king in our lives. It means the recognition, again, of God's right to own us, to direct us, to replace our plans with his, to change us, and to make both the major and minor decisions of our life. But restoration also means cleansing. The spirit and the soul are cleansed by our great high priest who, when a human heart earnestly confesses its sin, washes away the guilt, tidies up the past, and restores us to a place of fellowship and blessedness in his sight.

Now, return from sin is always the work of God's grace. In the first verse:

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. {Ezra 1:1b RSV}

And verse 5 says:

Then rose up the heads of fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. {Ezra 1:5 RSV}

God always takes the initiative. No one, after falling into a sinful experience, would ever come back to Christ unless God brought him back. This is indicated so clearly in the case of these Israelites. When they had gone into Babylon, they became a different kind of people. Dr. J. Vernon McGee has pointed out that while they were in Israel they were sheep-keepers, or shepherds. When they went to Babylon they could no longer keep sheep, so they became shop-keepers, or merchants. And they became very successful, too. So much so that this stereotyped image of the Jew is popular worldwide today -- the merchants of the earth. In Babylon they started a number of chain stores -- Macy's, Emporium, and some other leading department stores. They became so prosperous, so lost to materialism, that they did not want to go back to Jerusalem even though they were still slaves and exiled from their own land. Many of them refused to return when God opened the door. But the Spirit of God stirred up the hearts of some and made them unsatisfied with material prosperity. Mere things will never satisfy the deep-seated cry of the human spirit. When we feel that crying need, God the Spirit is stirring us up to return and rebuild the things that make for spiritual strength.

Under Zerubbabel the first return takes place. This great kingly descendant led about fifty thousand people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. The account of that return is given to us in chapters 1 and 2. When they came to Jerusalem, it was the seventh month of the year -- just in time for the Feast of the Tabernacles of the Jews. This Feast of Tabernacles (also called the Feast of Ingathering) was the time when Israel dwelt in booths to remind them of their pilgrim nature. Incidentally, this feast looks forward to the eventual regathering of Israel from the vast worldwide dispersion for the millennium and is the feast that is mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the foundations of the temple being relaid.

Their first act was to build an altar on the original temple site in the midst of the ruins. Out under the open sky they erected an altar to God and began to worship and offer sacrifice as the law of Moses had bid them. This is significant because the first act of a heart that really desires to return from wandering in darkness in the ways of the world to real fellowship with God, is to erect an altar. An altar is always the symbol of ownership. It is both the acknowledgment that God has sole right to us and the symbol of our personal relationship to him. Therefore, an altar almost invariably involves sacrifice, worship, and praise -- the sacrifice of recognizing the truth, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20); the worship of again enjoying a restored relationship, when again the heart is ministered to by the only one who can meet its needs; and the praise of a rejoicing heart.

A man reminded me recently about an occasion when he took time off work to come talk to me about his prayer life. He had brought along sheets of paper on which he had written all the things that he had been trying to pray about. He had three or four sheets. At that time he had said, "I have a great deal of trouble with this. I find that it's hard to remember all these things and to go through these lists. It's so mechanical, so empty." I had suggested, "Why don't you just forget all this and spend your time, for a few prayer sessions anyway, just praising the Lord." He said, "I was mad. I took time off work to talk to you, and all you told me was, "Why don't you spend your time praising the Lord?" I wanted some advice for organizing my prayer life and handling it a little better. But after I got over being mad, I tried it -- and I found that it worked. There was a sense of restoration, a sense of restored personal fellowship." That is what God is after. That is why the altar is the important thing in this work of restoration.

The second thing they did was to lay the foundation of the temple. The work was met with mixed feeling, in chapter 3, verses 11-13:

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. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard afar. {Ezra 3:11b-13 RSV}

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever come back to God after a time of coldness and withdrawal -- a captive of sin's power -- with a great sense of joy as the foundations of fellowship were relaid by the Spirit? Yet also with regret for the lost and wasted years? This is exactly what is portrayed here. Tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the temple being relaid.

The third factor in this return under Zerubbabel is the opposition that immediately develops, as we read in chapters 4 through 6. A force is at work in every human heart, as in world affairs, that immediately rises up to oppose everything that God attempts to do. A force is found in every human individual that resists with enmity and hatred the work of the Spirit of God. This force immediately manifests itself here, and there is a great lesson in how it does so. This opposition first appears as friendly solicitude. Chapter 4, verses 1 and 2:

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." {Ezra 4:1-2 RSV}

Incidentally, this is the beginning of the Samaritans, who frequently appear in the New Testament. These Samaritans, worshipping the same God said, "Let us help you. We would like to join with you in this enterprise. You are rebuilding the temple. Fine. We would be glad to help." They come with an earnest, openhearted, friendly wish to participate in the work. A very subtle request, isn't it? It is not very difficult to say no to an enemy who breathes fiery threats of slaughter. But when he comes dripping with solicitude and offers to help in your projects, it is very difficult to say no. The only way you can do it is with a heart that is willing to be obedient to the word of God, as these people were. We read in verse 3:

But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." {Ezra 4:3 RSV}

That may have seemed a bit churlish, but it was not mere capriciousness that made them reply that way. God had commanded that Israel was not to fellowship with other nations, or to engage with them in enterprises that concerned the faith. What does this mean? That it was wrong for one nation to intermingle with another? No, this has been twisted and distorted, and applied today to situations in which it has no application. It means simply that God rejects utterly the philosophy of the world in carrying out his work in the world. There is a worldly religion. There is a philosophy that tries to interject worldly concepts, worldly philosophies, and worldly methods into the lives of God's people. God has simply made it clear that these are to be rejected. The philosophy with which the world would defend its actions and its attitudes is quite contrary to the work of the Spirit of God. The world reflects the spirit of the devil, who is the god of this age, in the philosophy, "Advance yourself. Do this for your own glory. Use religious ways to advance your purposes and win admiration, power, fame, or whatever your heart desires. Use religious ways to achieve self-satisfaction." God rejects this principle here.

The veil of friendship that was offered quickly turns to hatred. In verses 4 and 5:

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. {Ezra 4:4-5 RSV}

And in the next two chapters is the story of how successful they were in stopping the work of rebuilding the

temple. By deliberately attempting to frustrate these people, by mocking them and taunting them, they discouraged Israel from doing work that God had commanded. These so-called friends even used legal means to undermine Israel's authority and right to build. This is what goes on any time anybody wants to stand for God. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit." (Gal. 5:17) This is the picture that we have here, and the principle was quite successful. The work was stopped for sixteen years and the temple lay half-completed, overrun with weeds and grass. Again, worship ceased.

Then God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. These two men were God's instruments to move the people's hearts. The minute the people began to turn back to God, he also turned the hearts of the kings, Darius and Artaxerxes, and they issued the decree that started the temple work again. Finally the work was finished. In chapter 6 we read that the first thing they did was celebrate the Passover, marking the beginning of their life under God. Similarly, you can never make sense out of your conversion unless you are in fellowship with the living God. You have nothing to celebrate. You have nothing to thank God for unless you are enjoying the glory and the light of heaven upon your heart. It is only when you are in fellowship, with the temple built, that the Passover can bring joy to you.

The latter part of the book concerns the ministry of Ezra, who also led a return to the land. Ezra was a most remarkable man, a priest of the line of Aaron. In chapter 7, verse 6, we are told:

... this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. {Ezra 7:6 RSV}

Wouldn't you like to have that written of you, "the king granted him all that he asked"? What kind of man is this, whom a heathen gentile king regards so highly that he will give Ezra anything that he asks? The secret of this man's character is given in verse 10:

... Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, {Ezra 7:10a RSV}

That is something else isn't it? We may be Bible students. But are we Bible doers?

... to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel. {Ezra 7:10b RSV}

As a result, Ezra could ask anything of the king and the king would grant his request.

Now this man is a man of the word. Therefore, God sent him to Jerusalem to strengthen and beautify the temple. That is the work of the word of God in our lives. It strengthens and beautifies within us the place of our fellowship with God. Ezra came to Jerusalem and found an incredible condition. In chapter 9 Ezra writes:

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

What does this mean? They were simply starting the whole wretched mess all over again. This is what had broken the strength of the nation before. This is what had undermined the power of God among them and finally dispersed the people, broken up the tribes, and separated them into two nations. At last, as they had carried on this idolatrous practice, God had delivered them into the hands of their captors. Now, after seventy years, they hadn't learned a thing. The flesh never changes. No matter how long you walk in the Spirit, you will never get to the place where you cannot revert to the worst you ever were, if you depart from dependence upon the Spirit of God. They are right back to the same old ways. Ezra, in verse 3, says:

When I heard this, I rent my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and

beard, and sat appalled. {Ezra 9:3 RSV}
... until the evening sacrifice. {Ezra 9:4b RSV}

It was unbelievable.

As the book nears its close, Ezra prays to God and confesses this great sin. In his graciousness God moves in the hearts of the people. The leaders come in broken-hearted contrition to Ezra and acknowledge the wrong. A proclamation is issued. The people assemble together. It happens to be a day when it is raining, but despite the rain, the people stand, thousands of them in front of the temple, and confess their guilt -- the fact that they had disobeyed God -- and agree to put away the wives and children they had acquired outside the will of God.

Now this is a hurtful thing, isn't it? It isn't easy. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "If any one comes to me...does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children...he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) Our relationship with God comes first. It doesn't mean that a man is to put away his wife today. This is a symbolic teaching. It means that we are to put away whatever stems from the flesh, which is always pictured by these Canaanite tribes in the land. But we love the flesh, don't we? We like to feel angry and resentful toward others. We love to nurse a grudge, cherish feelings of bitterness, or keep an unforgiving spirit burning away in our hearts against someone. We love it! We don't want to give it up! These things can cause physical ailments in us. Perhaps more than fifty percent of the nervous and physical problems that we suffer are due to wrong attitudes. But when someone points it out to us, we would rather go on having the problem than change the spirit or the attitude. It is hard, isn't it? It was hard for the Israelites to put away their wives and children, but they realized that the only chance of being restored to the place of fellowship with the living God and finding the power of God manifest once again among them, was to be obedient to his word. Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away...If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." (Matt. 5:29, 30) Be ruthless in these things. Put them away.

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Prayer:

Thank you again, Father, for this insight into your word. Give us obedient hearts, that we may walk in ways pleasing to you and that the inner temple of our soul -- our spirit -- may be rich and radiant with your fragrance and presence. In Christ's name. Amen.

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