

Chapter 4: Return! Leave Babylon and go to Jerusalem (Ezra 1-2)

As we study the book of Ezra, we see there are steps they took to rebuild the temple. The steps are symbolic of the steps we must take as we commit ourselves to return to God and, in doing so, rebuild ourselves as representatives of Christ; His Holy Spirit indwelt temples.(1 Corinthians 2:16-17). So far in our study, we have worked towards understanding the society in which we are immersed; the fact that there is a problem; and that we need to be faithful and loyal to our God. It is now time for us to turn our direction toward God, realizing there is need for transition. For the Israelites that was a physical need. For ourselves, while there could be a need to move ourselves physically to accomplish this, there is predominantly a spiritual need to return to God.

In the beginning of Ezra, we see that the Lord uses King Cyrus of Persia to fulfill His Word spoken to Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1; Jeremiah 25:12). The Lord moved the king's heart to release the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God. God was merely using King Cyrus as an instrument for His direction. Whether or not he believed in God is not necessary for us to know in order for us to see what God is doing here. God is calling to His people. Do you hear the call? He is still calling today. No different than back then, God through Jesus is calling us today. When I think of the call God has for the body of believers today, I am reminded of the words from Isaiah 42:5-7:

⁵ Thus says God the Lord,
 Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 Who spread out the earth and its offspring,
 Who gives breath to the people on it
 And spirit to those who walk in it,
⁶ "I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness,
 I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You,
 And I will appoint You as a covenant to the people,
 As a light to the nations,
⁷ To open blind eyes,
 To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
 And those who dwell in darkness from the prison.

Isaiah 42:5-7

In this Scripture, Isaiah is being used by God to prophesy the coming of the Messiah and what He will do through the Messiah. Jesus is that Messiah. We must remember that as believers in Christ we have a purpose to fulfill and that purpose is to show God's righteousness throughout this earth so others will see their need for Jesus. Accepting Jesus as our Savior brings about the Holy Spirit indwelling us and guiding us in fulfilling this purpose. That is what Jesus is telling us to do in the great commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and Isaiah prophesied the same call. People of the world are blinded from God. They can't see Him because this world has blocked their vision from Him. They are imprisoned in their own lives and need to be released from the darkness that has been cultivated. And, dear believer, you hold what they need. You hold the Spirit of the One and Only God. You have the Light they are so desperate to see. Christ in you - that is what God is calling for here. He is calling for you to allow Christ to work IN you and THROUGH you. He is calling for righteousness.

Do you hear the call?

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It is my hope that you are hearing the call from the Father. It is important that we not only read a book about returning, but really take the message to heart - hear the Father calling and be obedient to His call. Recall that King Cyrus' proclamation of freedom went to all the original 12 tribes, but only Judah and Benjamin responded and returned to rebuild God's Temple. Judah and Benjamin heard the call and returned. The others - well, to put it simply - were comfortable in their surroundings and they saw no need for a return. Many had become quite comfortable living in this foreign land and the prospect of returning home to start over in the ruined city of Jerusalem was daunting.

Looking at our own hearts, we must ask ourselves are we hearing the call? Do you see the need to return to God and His ways or are you comfortable where you are? Whoa . . . time to stop that truck again . . . what are you talking about!?! I worship God. I go to church. I pay my tithes. I serve the church with my time. Why are you saying I need to return? . . . O dear beloved, it is because we as American Believers in Christ know how to play church, but deep down in our hearts we know that God is calling for righteousness. We know how to "sacrifice," but we aren't allowing God to filtrate His love through us into the hearts that need it. The softest way I know how to respond to your inquiry is to say, if you are thinking you don't need to change, then you may not be hearing God calling. Why? Because anyone who is a believer that is striving to grow closer to God knows that He is ALWAYS calling our hearts to be more Christ-like. He is always calling our hearts to change towards righteousness. In our walk, He is creating in us a new heart and renewing a steadfast spirit (Psalm 51:10). He is giving us a heart that knows Him. A heart that will fully turn toward Him - not just partially. (Jeremiah 24:7).

There is a disconnect in our Christian walk. We have forgotten not only what we are purposed to do, but who we really are in Christ. In the beginning, God created us to commune with Him. Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created man in His own image. This is a basic truth that we must go back and revisit, also. And when you do, remember this - when God created man in His own image it was before the fall of man. Before man was tainted with sin. So many times, because we look at man and see sin, we forget this basic truth. God created ALL mankind in His image. So one may ask, why do some hear God calling and some don't. There is a separation - a disconnect - and that disconnect comes from the tainting of sin.

The only way for us to hear the call of God is to first and foremost receive His Son as our Savior. Until we do that, God is wooing us through His Holy Spirit. Unbelievers will only hear God calling them to salvation and nothing more. Receiving Jesus empowers us to hear this call because He paid the price for our sins and reconnected us to the Father. At that time He gave us the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit He communes with us and directs us in all truths. However, there is much interference which hinders us in hearing the call and that interference is when we allow sin to remain in our lives. It causes static on our communication line with God. It is like static on our radio stations.

It is hard for us to get this concept in today's world of technology, but there was a time when you could try to tune into a radio station and it would have static. The static made it hard to hear the communication that was coming through the airwaves from the station. However, you could still hear the station, just not clear. Sometimes that happens today, but not that often. Many times the reason the station would have static would be because of one of two issues. Either the station had a poor transmitter or, what was most likely the case, you weren't close enough to the station to tune it in properly. As Holy Spirit indwelt believers, we will feel the convictions of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but depending on how close we are to the Father determines if we are hearing the call. That is why it is important that we return out of our Babylon and to Jerusalem. We know that God doesn't have a poor transmitter. He is perfect. Therefore, we must be too far away from Him to hear. So we must return and draw close to Him.

How do I return?

Start with examining your heart in regards to the obvious. Are there obvious things in your life that must be removed? Then begin immediately eliminating them from your life. These can be time consuming things. Are you spending too much time on social media, watching television/streaming, sleeping, busying yourself with projects that are not of God. Whatever the obvious thing that needs to be removed - do so! And don't just play around with doing it, either. If social media is your problem, cancel your account. If television/streaming is your problem, cancel your account. Wow! That seems drastic. Yes, it is, and that is how important it is that we eliminate these obvious things from our lives. They are the trees that are preventing us from seeing the forest right in front of us. God needs for you to eliminate these trees so He can have more of your attention.

Next, fill that time with things of God. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to eliminate the obvious obstacles in our lives and then stay in Babylon. In other words, we may take great strides in eliminating things in our lives that cause us to not be connected to God and then we do one of two things.

1. ***We do not replace that time or activity with godly things*** which causes idle hands. Idle hands make way for the devil to work because it sets up shop for him. (Proverbs 16:27)
2. ***We replace that time or activity with ungodly things.*** Once this is done we have just taken another path of allowing hindrance between us and the Lord.

Be purposeful about filling in godly things. Start with adding more time in the Word and then allow the Word to prick your heart into change. Allow God's Word to work on your heart so that you see what it is particularly that God has planned for you to do. When we remember who we are in the Lord we recall our purpose. When we recall our purpose, then we see what God really means when inspirationally He expressed through Paul that we are part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and we have work created for us to do in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:10)

Deepening the Walk

Consider how the Israelites were released to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild God's temple. How can you relate to hearing God's call in your own life?

Read Ezra 1. In what way did God call them to return to Jerusalem?

What were the things they took WITH them?

Realize that they took the articles of the temple back with them. Things of God. Leaving behind the things of the past and pressing forward to the future as God was leading them.

The Lineage through Christ

The Word of God is particular in writing down the lineage and names of individuals who are His people. This shows us how dear His people are to Him. It reminds us of how personal our God truly is. Believers have been adopted into the lineage through Christ. Look at this concept more closely as you consider who you are in Christ.

Read Ezra 2:1-63. Even though there are many names listed in this chapter, it was only a remnant of the Israelites that were returning to Jerusalem. List below how they were described. (e.g. descendants of and/or position they held)

To put in perspective the small remnant of Israelites that returned, let's look at the number of Levites that returned. It is listed in Ezra 2:40 that 74 Levites returned. When God had Moses and Aaron count the number of Levites who were firstborn males and one month old or older in Numbers 3:43 there was 22,273. And this was ONLY the firstborn males. Wow! Huge difference. God's people had been dispersed that much.

Note how this description goes from listing lineage by tribe to more of what they do in the temple. Even though only a remnant returned to rebuild the temple, we can see that they saw their purpose in returning. A singer, for example, would see they should return to rebuild the temple for reasons of doing what they were called or created to do. They would see it as their obligation.

Read Romans 8:12-17. Who does Paul say we have an obligation to and why do we have this obligation?

As we remember who we are in Christ and begin to exit our Babylon, we must remember that there are things in our life that should not go with us. These are obvious hindrances from the Father and must be removed. When establishing our obligation, we realize there are things we must leave behind. Consider what they were leaving behind after being in captivity for 70 years. What do you think they had to leave behind? How hard would it have been to leave those things? Especially for those who were 70 and younger and grew up in captivity.

God's call can be hard for us to distinguish many times because sin is hindering our hearing. Reality is that we know of things we need to shed from our lives, but are unwilling to do so for some reason. These things keep us hostage and have a stronghold on us

Read Ephesians 1:3-10. What did God choose for believers before the creation of the world? (v. 4-5)

How has God revealed Himself to us and equipped us to do this? (v. 6-9)

All of this is done to prepare us for an important time. When is that time? (v. 10)

Read Ephesians 5:1-17. Here Paul is expressing how we should regard evil in our lives. What are some of the things that this Scripture points out as being evil?

Where were we at one time? Where are we now and what does that consist of? (v.8-9)

What should our ultimate goal be as we focus on exiting Babylon and returning to Jerusalem? (v. 10-12)

In Whom can we obtain that goal? (v.13-16)

Here it is - our call to return. Not only because there is an obvious need in our lives to do so, but because of WHO we are in Christ. Are we going to heed the call? Are you going to be part of the remnant that returns?

Reflect Upon God's Desire:

Read Psalm 126. What does God desire for us? Can you see that this is why He desires for us to return?

Praise, Repent And Yield:

Lord, I **praise** You for . . .

I **repent** of . . .

I **yield** to You . . .