

Not Alone: God's Relentless Pursuit Return from Exile

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I went to a college, CCU, that no longer exists. Beautiful! Best view in the city! AND Katy Perry performed there once. Here is a photo of me on the day I graduated [view the online sermon to see the photo]. It's probably hard to see, but the Greek inscription on the sign says "*to phos tou kosmou*," which means "the Light of the World. The school existed to train Christian leaders in the Christian Scriptures, to teach about Jesus, the Light of the World! But now, it's closed. RIP.

A couple years ago, I went back to take a look. It was not a very good sight. The dorm I lived in—torn down. The grass I threw frisbees in—overgrown. The building I took classes in—dusty and disheveled. The library I cheat—just kidding! Here's what I saw: what once was, was no longer! Things would never be the same. "The Light of the World" had seemingly been extinguished.

Today we wrap up our series called **NOT ALONE**, teaching through the Old Testament, and where have we been? We've been here [view the online sermon for an image of stock market performance]. Israel had become like my school—torn down, dusty, not good. What once was, was no longer! But wouldn't you know it? God's people began returning from exile, and today we get to talk about that through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Jewish people were asking questions: We've been lost; how do we return? Our culture has receded; how do we rebuild? Our ways have been subverted; how do we reform? Is it that what once was is no longer? And is it that what is no longer in fact never shall be again?

For one final go, we're going to use our **LIFE** acrostic. (Won't you miss it?)

L → Literal—What is the original meaning/message of the book?

I → Incarnational—How is Jesus reflected in the book?

F → Formational—How does the book apply to our lives?

E → Eternal—How does the book point us to heaven and eternity?

LITERAL

Let's start with the literal. What are these books about? The return from exile happened in three waves. Each time a wave of people came back, they had three priorities: **RETURN, REBUILD, REFORM**. So, let's go through it. Left side, you're Wave One. Middle, you're Wave Two. Right side, you're Wave Three.

Wave One

RETURN: In 538 BC, the Persians had taken control and they allowed the first wave of exiled Jews to return home. "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation... 'Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them'" (Ezra 1:1-3).

REBUILD: "When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem...and began to build the altar of the God of Israel" (Ezra 3:1-2). The altar began to be rebuilt. We also see that the temple gets rebuilt. "They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building of the house of the Lord" (Ezra 3:8).

REFORM: They restored proper worship.

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord. (Ezra 3:3-5)

Wave Two

RETURN: The second wave occurred in 458 BC. This time, Ezra himself returned.

After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah...came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. (Ezra 7:1-6)

Two things are important about Ezra: (1) he was a priest, and (2) he was a scribe. In other words, he could facilitate worship and he knew the Bible!

REBUILD: During this wave, there was not much rebuilding.

REFORM: When Ezra came back, he instituted another set of reforms. Remember, Ezra was passionate about God's law. Because of this, it was easy for him to spot places where the Jews weren't living up to God's standards. As one example:

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honor the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives." (Ezra 10:10-11)

Wave Three

RETURN: Thirteen years after Ezra returned (445 BC), Nehemiah, cup-bearer to the Persian king, returned to Jerusalem with another group because of a report he heard that it was still in ruins. He wanted to fix it!

REBUILD: When Nehemiah returned, one more thing needed to be finished: the walls of the city of Jerusalem! "Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (Nehemiah 2:17). Despite much opposition, Nehemiah succeeded. "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days" (Nehemiah 6:15).

REFORM: After Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's walls, Ezra did a public reading of God's law, and then the people covenanted together to remain faithful to God, listing out specific places in which they had been unfaithful and wanted to do better. Here's a list from Nehemiah 10: no intermarriage, keep the Sabbath, provide needs for temple worship, recognize God's right to the firstborn, tithe.

In short, **RETURN**, **REBUILD**, and **REFORM** are what Ezra and Nehemiah are all about.

INCARNATIONAL

But now, what about the incarnational? How do these books point us to Jesus?

Have you ever had a moment in which your expectations are greater than the reality? When Ash and I were preparing for marriage, we went downtown to get our marriage certificate at the Marion County Clerk's Office. We were so excited. Two little lovebirds. The week before our wedding, we drove to the County Clerk building downtown. This was a meaningful moment but it did not live up to the hype! The building was drab and suffocating. We walked in and talked to the office lady.

US: "Hi! We're here because we're getting married!"

HER: "Name."

US: "Emerson and Ashley!"

HER: "I.D."

US: "Here ya go!"

HER: "Are either of you intoxicated?"

US: "Um...no ma'am?"

HER: "Say this oath and it'll be \$25."

Let's just say, that experience did not meet our expectations!

Even though there was a lot of **RETURNING**, **REBUILDING**, and **REFORMING** going on, the reality could never live up to expectations. This occurred in three main ways. Think with me on this:

- **THINK ALTAR.** What was the altar for? Sacrifices.
- **THINK TEMPLE.** What was the temple for? God's presence.
- **THINK PEOPLE.** What were the people called to? Obedience.

But did these live up to the hype? No. Look with me:

- **THINK ALTAR.** Even though the people reinstituted their sacrifices, the sacrifices had to keep happening because the people kept sinning. They never had an all-sufficient sacrifice!
- **THINK TEMPLE.** "But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy" (Ezra 3:12). This new temple did not reach the former glory of the previous temple. The young didn't know it, but the elders did.
- **THINK PEOPLE.** Even though the people had repented, confessed, reformed, and covenanted to be faithful, it didn't matter. In Nehemiah 13, the people went right back into disobedience. They profaned the temple, they intermarried, they didn't honor Sabbath, and on it goes!

Crazy, right? Friends, this is exactly why Jesus came.

- **THINK ALTAR.** The old sacrifices couldn't cut it; Jesus' sacrifice does.

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:4, 11-12, 14)

- **THINK TEMPLE.** The new temple paled in comparison to the old. God's glory remained absent. In Christ, however, my friends, God himself came down! "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).
- **THINK PEOPLE.** The people were sinful and disobedient. Jesus was entirely perfect. "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26).

Do you see how Ezra and Nehemiah point us to Christ? Jesus is our better sacrifice. Jesus is God enfleshed. Jesus is perfectly obedient! This is how Ezra and Nehemiah are incarnational.

FORMATIONAL

But now, let's get this on the ground and move to the formational. How do Ezra and Nehemiah apply to our lives?

In 2019, the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, France, caught on fire. The beautiful Christian church was engulfed in flames. The scene was eerie. After the fires were put out, the world was left with this, this, and this [view the online sermon to see the photos].

The Notre Dame fire was symbolic. A symbol of beauty, goodness, and truth was burned down. Culturally, it feels like things like beauty, goodness, and truth have been either slowly receding or quietly subverted. For many years it has felt like things have been on fire: political fires, financial fires, cultural fires, and maybe you've had some personal fires.

All this leads to a question: If we're all a little lost, how do we return home? If things are receding, how do we rebuild? If things have been subverted, how do we reform? Is returning, rebuilding, and reforming even possible?

The answer is yes. Over time, brick by brick, Notre Dame was restored [view the online sermon to see the photos]. Yet it must be realized that it's different. It's not the same.

What Ezra and Nehemiah show us is that while it may be the case that personally or culturally (or both!) that things have gone awry, we can still **RETURN**, **REBUILD**, and **REFORM**. It won't be the same, but it can be better. How do we do that?

1. **Lay the spiritual foundation.** Just as both Ezra and Nehemiah went to the Lord (through prayer, through the altar, through Scripture), so too must we seek Him in prayer, run to Christ's cross for assurance, and educate ourselves in who God is and what God has revealed.
2. **Lay the legal foundation.** Just as both Ezra and Nehemiah worked to bring back God's laws and rules, so too, for personal and cultural renewal, must we recommit ourselves to what God says.
3. **Lay the physical foundation.** What's the point of rebuilding and reforming if you don't have "walls" to protect what you've rebuilt and reformed? Just as Nehemiah worked to construct the walls of his city, so too must we, for personal or cultural renewal, work to put up the appropriate walls to live the life of faith that Jesus calls us to. We block off times in our calendar for prayer and Scripture, for Church, for life group. We block off vices that the enemy might use (too much alcohol, too much internet time, too much FanDuel). We block off frivolity, so we can live generously. We block off pride, so we can serve humbly. We block off fear so we can live courageously for God!

RETURN, REBUILD, REFORM. That's the call. To return, to rebuild, and to reform we must, in the power of the Holy Spirit, lay the right foundation—spiritual, legal, and physical—on Christ, on Scripture, with faith and courage! That's the formational aspect of this text.

ETERNAL

Now, let's look at the eternal. How do Ezra and Nehemiah point us to our eternity? To heaven?

Here's what Ezra-Nehemiah show us: we can **RETURN, REBUILD, and REFORM** here and now. God uses that to his glory! But in a sense, something will always be missing. Why? Because we await the day when Christ will return to make all things new.

One day Jesus will **RETURN**. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31-32).

When he **RETURNS**, he will **REBUILD** this world! "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true'" (Revelation 21:5).

As he **REBUILDS** this world, he will **REFORM** our broken, sinful hearts once and for all. "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).