

RISE UP!

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 1

First Message

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Ezra 1

The book of Ezra features returning and rebuilding.

The Israelites, after settling in the land of Canaan, which the Lord promised to give them, divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The people of both kingdoms turned to other gods. As a result, the Lord raised up Assyria to conquer the northern kingdom, in 722 B.C., and Babylon to conquer the southern kingdom, in 586 B.C.

The Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and carried off many of the Israelites into exile. In 538 B.C., Babylon was conquered by Persia, which allowed the Israelites to return to the promised land and rebuild the temple. Not all the exiles returned. Neither did they return all at once.

The book of Ezra features the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple—and all the challenges the Israelites faced along the way.

Return and rebuild

Ezra is book for these times. The pandemic sent us into an exile of sorts. For a long time, we didn't meet in our building and worshiped online. Some stopped worshipping altogether.

Earlier this year, we began to return. Not everyone has returned. A survey of Bay Area pastors by Transforming the Bay with Christ indicates that only forty-two percent of worshipers have returned to in-person services in the Bay Area. I don't know what our percentage is. Many are staying away for good reasons, and we will continue livestreaming our services. On the other hand, more than fifty people attended our newcomers' lunch last Sunday. It was very exciting.

I think just about all of us can agree: worshipping in person is better than worshipping online. We want everyone to know that we're meeting in person on Sunday mornings and now have three options: 9 a.m. inside, 11 a.m. inside, and 11 a.m. outside on the patio.

As we continue to return, we want to rebuild. Someone might say, "Didn't we already rebuild? We remodeled our worship center, didn't we?" Well, yes. But the rebuilding of the temple doesn't so much correspond to the rebuilding of any structure. Today, according to the New Testament, God doesn't dwell in a building; he dwells in and among his people. Together, the people of God constitute the temple of God. We "like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

We therefore want to build into each other. A building to meet in helps us do that, but it's not about the building, of course; it's about the people. This building is not the church; the people are the church. Peninsula Bible Church meets here, as our sign outside the building declares. In fact, although the book of Ezra features the rebuilding of the temple, community building is at the heart of the book.

Just as the Israelites faced challenges as they returned and rebuilt, we too have faced, and will continue to face, challenges. May God use his word in the book of Ezra to help us.

Stirring of the Spirit

When I was twenty-eight years old, just as I was about to start my new job as an editor for what was then called the *Contra Costa Times*, I felt that I had to do something, but I didn't know what it was.

I had been a follower of Jesus for twelve years, since I was sixteen years old, and follow him I did—but only to worship services and Bible studies. I now felt, suddenly and irrepressibly, that I had to follow him in some other way.

Where did this feeling come from? I hadn't gone looking for it. I didn't manufacture it. It came, unbidden, from some place inside me. I believe the Holy Spirit was stirring me. I believe the Spirit was telling me that it was time to follow Jesus to some place other than worship services and Bible studies.

I had to do something, but what?

Have you ever felt something like what I felt, as if God were stirring you in some way? Do you feel that way now? Today in Ezra 1 we're going to meet some people who were "stirred" by God.

The Lord stirs up Cyrus

Ezra 1:1-4:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, 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 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

The first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia who conquered Babylon, was 538 B.C. Earlier, Jeremiah, a prophet of Israel, anticipated the downfall of Babylon and the return from exile (Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10-11, 51:11). In order to fulfill his word through the prophet, the Lord raised up Cyrus, a pagan king, to conquer Babylon, and now he stirs him up to make arrangements for the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

In his proclamation, Cyrus, though he worships other gods, recognizes the power of the Lord, the God of Israel, even acknowledging that the Lord has given him all the kingdoms of the earth. Moreover, he says that the Lord has "charged" him to rebuild the temple. Cyrus then commissions the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, encouraging them by appealing to their God to be "with" them.

Cyrus seems to have a well-developed view of the Lord, calling him both the God of heaven, whose power

extends to the earth, and the God who is in Jerusalem but who nevertheless can be "with" his people in Babylon.

The words translated "each survivor" would be better translated "whoever is left." In verse 4, Cyrus is addressing the Israelites who will be remaining in Babylon after their fellow countrymen have returned to Jerusalem. Cyrus not only commissions the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, he also commissions the Israelites who stay behind to support the effort.

This has all the earmarks of a new exodus. In the first exodus, the Lord liberated the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. In the new exodus, the Lord liberates the Israelites from captivity in Babylon. In both cases, he does so to take them to the land of Canaan, the promised land. The prophet Isaiah in particular anticipated a new exodus (Isaiah 43:14-21, 48:20-21, 52:12).

The Lord is with us

God fulfills his word in unpredictable ways. Just as he fulfilled his word through Cyrus, he fulfilled his word more than five centuries later through another pagan king, Caesar Augustus, who decreed that all the world should be registered, which sent a young couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where she gave birth to a boy, whose name was Jesus (Luke 2). When that boy grew up, God fulfilled his word through another pagan ruler, Pontius Pilate, who "delivered him up to be crucified" (Matthew 27:26).

God promises that Christ will come again to establish his eternal kingdom. No doubt we can expect him to fulfill his word again in unpredictable ways.

Especially because of Christ, we know that what Cyrus said is true: the Lord is with his people. The Lord is with us. One of the names of Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

When Jesus calls his disciples in the gospel of Mark, he calls them first simply to be "with him." Jesus, who is God with us, calls us to be with him. As such, as matter of first importance, we must cultivate a relationship with the Lord.

However, the Lord is with us not simply for us to have a relationship with him, as if all he wants us to do is pray and read the Scriptures. Jesus calls his disciples not only to be with him but also to "send them out"

to serve his purposes (Mark 3:14). As we relate to the Lord, he inspires us to serve his purposes. The Spirit also empowers us to serve his purposes and then enhances our efforts.

As we consider the book of Ezra, the Lord is with us not least as we return to 3505 Middlefield Road and as we rebuild our community. How so?

The Lord stirs up the Israelites

Ezra 1:5-11:

Then rose up the heads of the 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 that is in Jerusalem. 6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. 7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Judah and Benjamin are the two tribes that make up the southern kingdom of Israel. The “heads of the fathers’ houses” would be leaders of extended families in the two tribes. When the Israelites were back in Canaan, the priestly tribe of Levi was scattered throughout the tribes. The priests and Levites would be needed to lead in worship once the temple was rebuilt. The Lord not only stirs up Cyrus, he also stirs up the Israelites—all for the sake of the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple.

Cyrus earlier commissioned the remaining Israelites to support the effort; now “all who were about” the returning exiles, including Gentiles, pitch in.

Finally, Cyrus orders Sheshbazzar, a leader in Judah, to take the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, confiscated and bring them back to Jerusalem so that they can once again be used in

the temple. By putting the vessels in the house of his gods, Nebuchadnezzar was attempting to demonstrate their superiority. In reality, the Lord had raised up the Babylonian king to destroy the temple. Now the Lord has raised up the Persian king to rebuild it.

Everyone is gifted

The word “all,” also translated “each” and “everyone,” is used in reference to God’s people three times in Ezra 1. Christ, after his death and resurrection, sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in each of his followers. Through the Holy Spirit, God is with each of us, and all of us together, to relate to us and empower us for his purposes. God, through his Holy Spirit, is with us as we return and rebuild our community. The Holy Spirit has gifted each of us for this very purpose:

—“To **each** is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

—“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by **every** joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds** itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

—“As **each** has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, . . .” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

The New Testament is clear: Each of us, as members of the body of Christ, has been uniquely gifted by the Spirit to do the work of the ministry, which involves serving each other and building up the body of Christ so that the church effectively carries out the ministry of Christ, both to the church and to the world. In our current context, each of us has a part to play as we return and rebuild.

No commandment

Do you need to know how you’re gifted? No, you do not. There is no commandment in the New Testament

that directs you to search for your spiritual gifts. Neither is there a commandment in the New Testament that directs you to identify our spiritual gifts. Two New Testament authors, Paul and Peter, mention spiritual gifts in four letters: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4.

Because neither Paul nor Peter sees fit to list all the gifts in any one letter, we're left to assume that it's not important for any one church to know about all the gifts. In fact, we have no way of knowing whether all the gifts are mentioned in the Scriptures.

For example, I've heard several people through the years say they think they have the gift of hospitality. If we were going strictly by the gifts listed in the New Testament, we would have to say that they do not have the gift of hospitality, because hospitality doesn't appear as a gift in the New Testament. Although both Paul and Peter encourage all of us to "show hospitality" (Romans 12:12, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 4:9), it seems to me that some are especially gifted to host people.

Moreover, the gifts are mostly listed, not defined.

Serve and watch

What then should you do? Two things: seek to serve and watch for how the Lord directs you. Watch for what doors open and what doors close. Who responded to the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord? "Everyone whose spirit God had stirred." Watch for how you feel. Does what you're doing bring you joy? Watch for how people respond when you serve. Do they say they're blessed?

At this church, we believe everyone is gifted to serve. We present opportunities to serve, but we refrain from coercing. We trust the Spirit to stir in your hearts at the right time and in the right way and reveal to you what you need to know when you need to know it.

Therefore, let me present an opportunity without coercing! As we return and rebuild, we want to build into our children and our youth. Usually, the biggest, long-term impact you can make on someone is when he or she is young.

On the one hand, I've seen surveys indicating that most people who come to Christ in the United States do so before the age of eighteen. On the other hand, I've also seen surveys indicating that most people who grow up in the church abandon faith in Christ at some point

after they leave that church. Therefore, it's especially important that we build into them while we have them.

Our kids have been through a lot in the last eighteen months. They could use our help.

Divine confluence

As the Spirit was stirring me to follow Jesus to some place other than worship services and Bible studies, I heard that my former youth pastor, who had been serving as the pastor of a small church in Washington, had just returned to California to try his hand at youth ministry again. It just so happened that his new position in California was located in the same city where I was starting my new job: Pleasanton.

I hadn't seen Conrad in seven years, but I called him, met with him, and told him about what I had been feeling. He suggested that I could volunteer in the high school youth group at Valley Community Church, where he was serving as youth pastor.

The confluence of my arrival at the newspaper and Conrad's arrival at the church, in the same city at the same time, coupled with the feeling that something in me had to get out of me, seemed beyond coincidence, as if it were ordained. So, I showed up at the church the next Wednesday night for the weekly meeting of the high school youth group, knowing only Conrad and not knowing what to expect.

At first, I was intimidated. I felt as if I were walking into a human pinball machine. Kids were bouncing off the walls and into each other—literally. I came back the next week, though, and the week after that. I came back every week.

Soon, I was no longer walking into a room of unknown people. Pretty soon, I knew all the kids. Some of them even began seeking me out for counsel, and I began spending time with them outside of the youth group meetings.

Then Conrad suggested that I teach one of the Bible studies. I wasn't sure how to go about it, but as I started to prepare, and as I stood up to teach, I realized that I knew more than I thought, because I had been listening to sermons and attending Bible studies for years. Soon, I was teaching on a regular basis.

I had read the Scriptures, but until I started teaching Bible studies, I had never studied them in depth. Once I

started digging into the word, I was captivated by what I was finding, and I was increasingly motivated to share what I was finding. Soon I was spending as much time studying, teaching, and counseling as I was working at the newspaper.

The Spirit stirred me at the right time in the right way, revealing to me what I needed to know when I needed to know it. He will do the same for you. The Spirit not only gifts, he also orchestrates.

Two ministries

I could go on and on about how I have seen people bless this community with their gifts, but let me highlight two ministries that I'm currently involved in.

First, when the pandemic hit, I was brokenhearted for the folks who were involved with the Seniors Bible Study. For a week or two, we stopped meeting.

Then Wesley and Julie Cheng approached me and said she could connect me to the members of the Bible study by phone through the Televisit software that they use to connect older adults. So, we resumed the Bible study over the phone, with Julie connecting us each week. Then, a bit later, some of the members were able to transition to Zoom, so we continued, with some connecting by Zoom and others connecting by phone.

Finally, we were able to meet in person again in Fellowship Hall, but some needed to remain on Zoom and others on Televisit. Marianne Strickfadden then approached me and said she'd be happy to serve as tech support, so now some members connect by phone, some connect by Zoom, some connect in person, and all connect to each other—thanks to Julie and Marianne.

You may ask how I lead an interactive Bible study in this way. All I can tell you is it works. It's a work of art—which is to say it's a work of the Spirit. Some who can't make it to church have said that the Bible study is a "lifeline" for them.

By the way, during the pandemic, the Seniors Bible Study has doubled in size.

Second, I serve on a ten-person team that organizes the annual Fall Retreat, which is next weekend. The Fall Retreat has been a huge ministry that connects different generations. I'm the only pastor in the mix, the only one who is paid to work for the church. It's an amazing team. And it's a thrill to watch the amazing things that the Spirit does as those people set the stage for him to work.

Don't think, however, that using your gifts requires you to be involved in some official church ministry. Following Jesus with the gifts the Spirit has given you is a way of life.

Rise up

This is just so beautiful! The Holy Spirit has gifted everyone!

In conclusion, look again at Ezra 1:5: "Then rose up the heads of the 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 that is in Jerusalem." They rose up.

Rise up, Peninsula Bible Church. Return and rebuild..

