

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 2

Second Message

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Ezra 2

If I met you for the first time, I'd introduce myself as Paul Taylor. But what if you didn't believe me? When I tell you my name is Paul, you say, "No, it isn't. Your name is Quincy." I insist my name is Paul and to prove it, show you a copy of my birth certificate. Since I was born in Texas, you say, "I don't trust Texas. Your name is Quincy." Getting desperate, I ask my parents to get on a plane. They fly here and tell you that they were there at my birth and they named me Paul. But you look at them and say, "They're lying. Your name is Quincy."

What do I do?

How do we know who we are? What if my parents weren't alive anymore and my birth certificate was lost, and I moved to a place where no one knew me. How would I know who I was anymore?

This is the situation that happened 2500 years ago in ancient Israel. An entire group of people had their identity stripped from them. They were deported from their homes. Many of them were given new names. They were expected to learn a new language. All traces of who they had been were erased.

I think many of us can resonate with that. Over the course of the pandemic, I think a lot of us can resonate with that. Over the course of the pandemic, the normal courses of our lives have been transformed. Many of the things that made us who we are—our activities, our responsibilities, our daily patterns, our time with friends and family—these things were taken away.

We were left wondering, "What's left when everything about who I am has been stripped away?"

Last week Scott Grant kicked off our series in the book of Ezra called "Return and Rebuild." We saw how God stirred the Spirit of a group of people and made it possible for them to return to their homeland. They had the chance to rebuild their lost identity.

This week we will hear more about who those people were. We'll hear their names, and we'll see what they do

to rebuild their identity. I'm hoping that their story will help us remember who you are.

The issue of our identity is one that never goes away. Young people worry about who they'll become. Middle-aged people try to figure out who they are. Older people are troubled by how they'll be remembered. All our lives, we ask the question, "Who am I?"

As many of us transition back from pandemic life, I've repeatedly heard people talking about how to rebuild our lives with a greater sense of intention. Instead of just allowing our lives to get unmanageable, how do I make sure not to get too busy? How do I do the more important things?

For me personally, these questions are front and center. The last several years have been tough. I've wrestled with periods of significant anxiety. I want to return and rebuild at a sustainable pace. I want to stay grounded in my identity. I want to keep God at the center.

In our passage this morning, we'll see the same kinds of desires. We'll see the ancient Israelites as they return from exile, working through their identity. They'll think about how they got to where they were. They'll try to figure out how to avoid letting that happen again. And they'll take action to make that happen.

Let's look at their story and see what we can learn.

Legacy of the past

Remembering who we are starts with our past. Before we hear about the group of people who are returning to Jerusalem, we are reminded of what happened to them.

Ezra 2:1:

Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.

Notice how this introductory verse recounts most of the recent past: “those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia.” These are the people who are returning—the people who experienced incredible trauma a generation prior.

Before we think about the return, let’s take a moment to understand the depth of that trauma. Far back in Genesis 12, God made a promise to a select group of people. In Genesis 12:2, God says, “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great.”

In Genesis 12:7, he says, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

We can think of these promises as focusing on two things. God promised them an identity and an inheritance.

Their *identity* was rooted in God’s blessing. He would make them a nation, and their name would be great. They would be the children of Abraham.

Their *inheritance* was all about the land. God would give them what they needed to have a prosperous life. In the ancient world, land was the key to life. If you had land, you could live. It was as simple as that.

You may not realize it, but “identity” and “inheritance” are what most of us want from life. We want to know who we are—that’s our identity. We want to have the resources necessary to make our lives work—that’s inheritance.

This is why it’s so easy to place too much emphasis on our careers. In our culture, our jobs can give us both our identity and our inheritance. I am what I do, and a good paycheck is all I need to make life work. Of course, those statements aren’t really true. But that’s a message for another sermon.

The same thing that we want is what God promised Abraham way back in Genesis 12. He would make them into his people—that’s their identity. And he would bless them—that’s giving them what they need to make life work.

Then they lost both of those things. Overnight. Their city fell to a ruthless enemy. The temple that signified God’s presence among them was destroyed. This is why Hosea describes Israel during that time in this way from Hosea 1:9, “You are not my people, and I am not your God.”

Tragically, they had lost their identity and inheritance. Their land was gone. The temple was gone. They had nothing. Everything had been stripped away.

Our passage opens by describing these people as “those exiles who had been carried away to Babylonia.” Their only identity was what had happened to them. They are defined by what they had lost.

Think about this for yourself. What have you lost? What have you gone through?

Maybe it’s parts of your identity or inheritance? Maybe you feel you have lost parts of your identity. Maybe you’re struggling with figuring out who you are. I know that some of us feel we’ve lost all the major pieces of ourselves. We feel like the very foundation of our identity has been shaken.

Think about something you’ve gone through over the past few years. Maybe it’s related to COVID or not. Try to summarize it in a word or a short phrase. I’m not going to ask you to share it. But keep that word in mind as we go on.

What do you do after such a loss? How do you live without an identity and an inheritance?

We are about to see what God does for this people.

What do you do then? How do you live without an identity and an inheritance?

We are about to see what God does for this people.

Who we are

What comes next in our passage is a dizzying list of names. There are over 100 unique names of people, families, and tribes in the next 56 verses. We’re not going to read them all, but I want us to listen to some of them. It works out that the list of names falls into a few categories, so we’ll pick a few names from each category.

As you listen, remember that these are not just names. They are people.

First, we hear of the leaders in Ezra 2, verse 2. You may notice there are 12 of them.

They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel.

In verse 1, they were called the people of the province. Now they are called the people of Israel. That's significant. Something about them is changing as they return.

We hear of people as identified by their families in verses 3-5:

The sons of Parosh, 2,172. The sons of Shephatiah, 372. The sons of Arah, 775.

We hear of people as identified by the place they used to live in verses 27-29:

The men of Michmas, 122. The men of Bethel and Ai, 223. The sons of Nebo, 52.

We hear of people as identified by their role in the community. First, the priests in verses 36-39.

The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. The sons of Immer, 1,052. The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. The sons of Harim, 1,017.

Then the Levites in verse 40:

The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.

Then the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants in verses 41-43:

The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139. The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,

Finally, the servants of Solomon. We're not exactly sure what group of people this refers to, but their list begins in verse 55:

The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda,

We have over 100 names of people identified using different categories: their families, their places of origin, their profession, their role in the community. Do you see what the author is doing here? This list re-establishes

their identity. These were not nameless, faceless masses of individuals who didn't know who they were. These were people. They had an identity. They had a backstory.

In fact, the list begins by calling them something incredibly important. They are no longer referred to as exiles. Now they are called "the people of Israel."

That's true for all of us as well. It's not enough to say that we all went through a global pandemic because that has meant something completely different for all of us. Each of us has a name, a backstory, an identity. We are the people of God. But who are we?

Have you ever wondered why there would be a list like this in the Bible? It's actually very surprising. Paper was incredibly expensive, and copying manuscripts was tedious work. Much of this would have been oral tradition before it was written down. Why waste the time and paper and effort to just list names?

I think it's to honor each person of this return. To give weight to who they were and how they fit into this community.

I want to give us a chance to do the same thing. You'll have an opportunity to share your name. What you're doing is saying that you are part of the people of the return. You sense that God is rebuilding something in your life. I'd love for all of us to be included in this list.

The purpose of this is two-fold. First, this is for you. This is for you to identify yourself as someone whom God is calling to return. You are someone in whom God is rebuilding something. No matter what you've been through in the last 18 months—whether it was a monumental tragedy or a slight inconvenience—you can testify that God is rebuilding something in your life. This is for you.

But it's also for us. It's for us to see each other and to recognize that we are in this together. We are returning and rebuilding together. This is not just an individual thing. It's happening as a community.

As you share your name, we'll see our names on the screen in front. This is us. These are the people of PBC in whom God is rebuilding something.

[Results shown on screen.]

For the people returning to Jerusalem, the most important issue for them was to re-establish their

identity. That's why the different categories of this list are so important. You have to know who you are, and the traditional categories of family, place, or profession gave these people an anchor.

That conviction also leads to what happens in the following few verses. At first, this is going to seem a bit confusing to us. But as we think through what's going on at a deeper level, it will make more sense.

Centering on your identity

In the next few verses, we hear about the people of the return excluding people whose identity couldn't be verified.

Ezra 2:59:

The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel:

Ezra 2:62-63:

These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. 63 The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

What's going on here? Why would they want to exclude people whose genealogies couldn't be verified?

Let's go back and remember why there were sent into exile in the first place. The nation of Israel had made a significantly wrong turn, and this had cost them everything. We already heard the effect in Hosea: "you are not my people." But what was the cause?

Jeremiah tells us in Jeremiah 8:19 as he speaks from God's point of view: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?"

God didn't walk away from his people. He didn't choose to make them "not his people." They chose it by turning away from him and falling into idolatry. They worshipped carved images and foreign idols. Put simply, God didn't take away their identity. They abandoned it through idolatry.

So now here they are going back to their land. They realize the terrible mistake they made, and they don't want it to happen again. They want to make sure that no hint of idolatry comes into this new community. They are desperate to safeguard their identity, so they go to his extreme measure to do so.

They don't want foreign influence in their new community. No hint of idolatry. No one whose genealogy can't be proven can be included in the priesthood.

What do we think of this decision? Were they right to exclude people who couldn't trace their identity?

Here's my take. They were right to be insistent on safeguarding their identity. They were absolutely correct that their first priority going into a season of returning and rebuilding should be making sure their identity was solid.

But they were wrong in how they applied it. Yes, God chose Abraham. And so it was Abraham's children who had the promise of being God's people. But they were applying that too strictly to genetics. Listen to what the apostle Paul says in Romans 9:8, "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."

Earlier in Romans, Paul said that it is the children of the promise are the ones who share the faith of Abraham, not his blood. Identity as God's people doesn't come from genetics. It comes from faith.

The same is true for us. Your faith gives you your identity. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you are a child of Abraham. You have the eternal promises of God.

In watching these people returning from exile, we can learn two things. First, identity is of the utmost importance. Second, we are prone to latching onto the wrong things to secure our identity.

What can you do to stay centered in your identity as a child of God? What in your life helps you to remember who you are? Do more of those things in your life.

Maybe it's something extreme. These ancient people excluded those who couldn't prove their genealogy. I know people who get tattoos to remind them of their identity. I know people who put Bible verses in their bathroom mirrors, memorize Scripture, wear a cross, change your name.

Think back to that word or phrase that you chose to describe what you've been through. That isn't who you are. What happened to you doesn't define who you are. God's promise to you gives you your identity. Stay centered in that.

We are, all of us, incredibly prone to forgetting who we are. So whatever it takes for you to remember who you are, day in and day out, do that. Find what it takes to stay centered in your identity and do that.

Our communal identity

In the last part of our passage, we'll see the people helping each other to do just that as they rebuild. I'll show you what I mean.

Ezra 2:64-69:

The whole assembly together was 42,360, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. 66 Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, 67 their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720.

68 Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments.

These ancient Israelites were rebuilding the temple of YHWH in their midst to represent to each other the presence of God in their midst. That's what the temple was. It was a unique physical space that somehow served as a touchpoint between earth and heaven. A place you could go to where the presence of the infinite was somehow made manifest. That's powerful.

And this temple gave the community its identity. It was a marker. A physical building that reminded them who they were. They were the people who God chose to live among. They were children of the promise. They were the people of Israel.

Each of them contributed what they could in order to make this reminder for the sake of the community. So here's the question for us: What can you contribute to cultivate the presence of God in this place? What can you contribute?

We all have something to share. That's one of our deepest held values at PBC. God has gifted each of us with something. We can all contribute what God has given us for the sake of the community. We all have a part to play in helping each other remember who we are.

What can you contribute? Your time? Your ideas? Your energy? Your leadership? Your home? Your baking skills?

As the icebreaker at our newcomer lunch two weeks ago, we shared hobbies that we had picked up during lockdown. We heard about kombucha classes, surf lessons, fish fries, sourdough baking, and more. I joked that we were keeping track of people's answers because we would ask them all to lead seminars on those new hobbies!

That's actually how this community works. We bring what we have. We offer it to God, and he uses it to manifest his presence to us, and, hopefully, to the world as well.

Conclusion

Let's come back to the imagination exercise from earlier: what if I tried to tell you who I am and you didn't believe me. You insisted that my name is Quincy instead of Paul.

That would be annoying, but it wouldn't actually matter. It doesn't matter whether you know who I am. What matters is that I know who I am.

As these people in ancient Israel returned to their land, they wanted to make sure their identity was solid. As long as they were grounding themselves in the promise of God, they were going to be fine. If you have faith in Christ, you are part of the people whom God is leading to return and rebuild.