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... the LORD restored
the fortunes of Zion..
Psalm 126:1

Exile & Return

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Good morning. When I was a kid I really had it made. I didn't have a whole lot of rules and regulations when it came to what happened to me after I got off the bus. Mom made it really clear, I get off the bus, I go home, I get out of my school clothes and put on my play clothes, which were nothing more than last year's school clothes, and I put those on and I go outside. And the rules were pretty simple - "You don't go into anybody else's house because I don't want you in my house and nobody else wants you in their house." (congregation laughs) And the second rule was "Be in earshot of the front porch, so when I come out and say dinner time or time to do homework you ought to be able to hear that and come. And if I don't call your name, the streetlight is the indicator. When the streetlight comes home you're home." It worked like that for the summer, that's the way it worked. Mom and dad had given me lots of toys, I had balls, I had the bikes, the scooters, my dad built me a fort in the back yard. There was plenty to keep me occupied, right? So me and my buddies, we had plenty of friends on the street. We would always play games, kick the can, dodge ball, baseball, sometimes we'd make up games. It's lucky I'm still alive right now, right?

One day we found a house on the street that was vacant. And in my neighborhood all the houses were detached, had a detached garage and so we would always kind of be in and around the neighborhood in different houses and sure enough, the side door to the garage was unlocked. We go in and there was nothing in it, but this was the greatest day ever for us because we now had the greatest playhouse of all time. And the electricity was still on which means the garage door actually worked. I mean you can imagine the kind of stuff we were doing. We were laying down trying to see how long it would take the garage - get pressure to go back up. We had all kinds of battles while we were opening and closing the door. This went on for about a week, nobody seemed to notice and I didn't say anything to my mom and dad. Technically I wasn't in anyone's house, right? (congregation laughs) One day I get there to the garage and I press the garage door opener and guess what falls? A key and it's a key

to the house. And you know where this is going, don't you. I mean if the garage was fantastic the house was going to be even better.

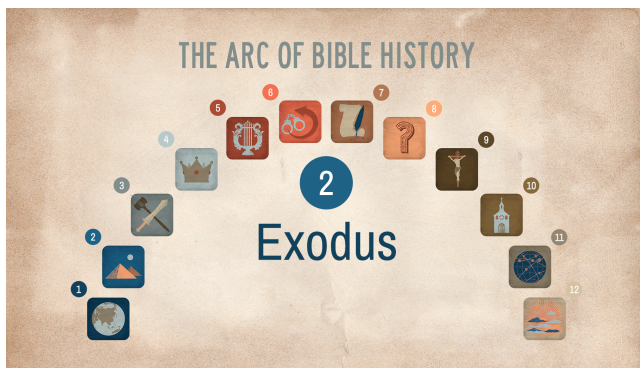
We go in and man sure enough, electricity, water, whole nine yards. This is great. We don't have to drink water out of the hose anymore, you know. I mean this is fantastic and we're in there playing around. It's smack dab middle of summer in Houston, Texas. So 100 degrees, 100% humidity and one of us has the bright idea that it's cold and we need a fire. (congregation laughs) We go outside and gather sticks and leaves and grass, and we put it right there on that stovetop. Remember the coils that would heat up when you turned them on? Not good. In a few moments the entire house was filled with smoke. We're doing what we were taught by the firemen that came by the school, you know, "stop, drop and roll." We're doing all that stuff. We get out of the house. One of my friends had already left because he knew this wasn't a wise decision. He goes home and as I'm leaving the house I'm coming around the corner, there's Ms. Eisenhower. She has the look of shock and horror. I have the look of "I'm busted!" (congregation laughs) I turn around and I look at the house - no kidding, there is smoke coming out of every orifice of it. The brick weep holes have smoke coming out of it. I mean it is terrible. The fire trucks show up, the EMS show up, all the neighbors are out there looking at us. Needless to say my mom and dad were not happy, and I entered an exile period of my life. (congregation laughs). I went into exile, I was no longer able to leave 2303 Walnut Ridge, right - my address. The front yard was it. I could watch my friends play, but I couldn't play. Good thing I was graduating the next year, so that's good - I'm just teasing. I wasn't in high school. (congregation laughs) Man, it was terrible. And then not only that, just the shame and the humiliation you feel, and the consequences and all. There were so many consequences, but mom and dad, I just remember them asking these questions and it went on forever. I mean I think they were just trying to make sure that they were sane and that I didn't need to be institutionalized because they were asking like "Why, I mean you've been given everything. You have a fort in the back yard, you have a basketball hoop, you've got more balls than you know what to do with, you've got bikes and skateboards, and your buddies. Why that?" Like right? I mean why would you do that why would you make that kind of decision, and I find myself asking that same question now that I have children. Like "Why? What are you thinking?" No, and you know what, as we come to this exile and return period in the nation of Israel and when we read the Bible we've got to be asking this "What are you guys thinking? You had it all. You had a land, you had a promise, you had a covenant, you had the God of Creation on your side. You've seen miracle upon miracle, the greatest stuff ever, and now you're going to go off and worship other gods. What are you thinking?"

There are some of us that look at our family and friends or we look at celebrities or we might even look at ourselves, and we look back and say, “What was I thinking. Why did I do that? What was going through my mind.” The problem with sin is its consequences. There’s not a person in this room that’s not affected by the consequences of sin. And some of us may be dealing with



the consequences of sin from yesterday; others of us dealing with the consequences of sin from 20 years ago, but the consequences of sin, that exile time when you’re being punished for what you’ve done. It’s difficult, and for the nation of Israel that’s what we’re going to look at today.

The consequences of sin is not really anything new as far as looking at the Bible. We’ve seen it at the beginning, haven’t we? We saw it with Adam and Eve. They sinned, and because of their sin they were kicked out of the garden. Matter of fact, we saw the consequences of sin with the flood, we saw it with the Tower of Babel because they wanted to build this tower, they were scattered to the nations. We also saw it in The Beginning as we walked through Genesis with Abraham as he lied about his wife, as he tried to come up with a different way to get his son that God had promised. Consequences of sin.



We also saw it in the Exodus as Moses led the people out of Egypt after 400 years of slavery. He didn’t obey God. He struck the rock instead of speaking to it, and therefore he couldn’t enter into the Promised Land. Consequences of sin. Or what about when the spies came back and they said “The land is there for the taking,” or at least two of

them did, and the rest of the people said “No, we can’t go in.” Consequences of sin - had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

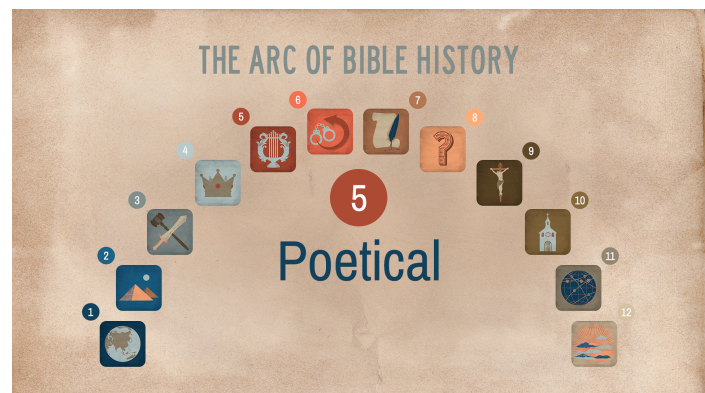
When they finally did take the land there was the Conquest & Judges, right? And the Conquest & Judges is all about sin. It’s all about judgment on the nations. It’s about judgment on all of their sin and then we think about the cycle of sin and consequences in the book of Judges as they sin, they’re oppressed, they repent. Sin, oppressed, repent.



And then when you think about the kingdom it doesn’t get any better. They wanted a king, but that didn’t help them. They had Saul and David and Solomon, and those guys weren’t all that great as they sinned and there were consequences of sin. The stories of David and Bathsheba, and David can’t build the temple - that’s sin. And now we’re actually going to get to the period where the entire nation is going to suffer the consequence of sin after sin as they had king after bad king after bad

king that lead them to worship false god after false god after false god. And now God’s going to look at Israel and say “No more. You will pay the price for your sin.” There are consequences.

Or what about last week in the Poetical section. When you think about what the book of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs and Song of Solomon and Psalms teaches. It teaches wisdom, and they say “A fool suffers harm,” that’s consequences. As Solomon recounts his life in Ecclesiastes and says “Don’t do it the way I did it. Find your pleasure in Jesus and God, not in the things



that I've tried because I've tried it all." Warnings.



And then finally we make our way to the Exile & Return, where God is going to send them into exile for 70 years, and they are going to have the consequences of their sin. I think there's some incredible things that we can learn today personally, as we learn The Big Picture story right here of this section of scripture we call the exile.

So if you would, turn with me to 2 Chronicles 36, let's see if we can make sense of it. I'm going to stay in this passage the entire time, believe it or not, even though this timeframe covers several books like Ezekiel and Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, prophets like Jeremiah, Haggai, Zachariah. I'm going to flip around a little bit, but you can stay right here in 2 Chronicles 36 because it kind of gives us the outline, the overarching view of the exile and the return.

As you're turning there, the nation is divided. The Northern Kingdom has been just tormented for the last 100 years by the Assyrian Empire. They're basically whittled down to nothing. You just have the Southern Kingdom left. They've had a few good kings that rose up and said, "Hey guys we need to reform", but it really didn't stick. They just kept going back to their evil, wicked ways, and at the end of 2 Chronicles 36 verse 15 we see what God's response is:

"The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, they despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."

This is a great place to start because I think sometimes we get the wrong idea about the consequences of sin. And especially when we get to this time period, because it's probably the most misunderstood time period in all of scripture. Mainly because it kind of gets out of order, you quit reading the Bible in chronological order at this time. You have Ezra and Nehemiah, which are next, but they skip right over the exile. And so this is a tricky timeframe. And so sometimes we look at consequences and we wonder, do they happen upon us without warning? And the answer to that is no. The consequences of sin do not come upon us without warning, and they didn't come on without warning here with Israel. There was prophet after prophet, messenger after messenger

that would go to them and say, "You've got to stop, you've got to turn from your wicked ways, you have to do it differently, you've got to obey God, you've got to return to the covenant." Prophet after prophet after prophet, but the scripture says they were despised, they were mocked, some of these guys run out of town. They tried to kill them, they didn't want to hear it. That doesn't sound like us, does it? I mean we don't want to hear the warnings, do we? It's not that the consequences of sin come without warning. The problem is we fail to heed the warning.

Listen to what Jeremiah says as he gives them warning. He just wraps up their sin in one very familiar passage, Jeremiah 2:13 he says:

"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

He looks at the nation and God says, "Hey, this is what you guys have done. You guys have forsaken God. He's the one who provides, he's the one that protects you, he's the one that leads and guides you, and you said this, 'Thanks but no thanks. We're going to come over here and we're going to guide ourselves and lead ourselves and protect ourselves and worship whatever we want, and so that's what we're going to do.'" So in essence, we say "Thank you for all that you've done, but we're going to do our own way." That make sense? I mean that's what sin is. Sin is turning away from God, the Living Water and going to a different source. So Jeremiah says "You can't do that. That's what you've been doing." And then two chapters later in chapter 4 verse 5 he says this. God says:

"Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say: 'Sound the trumpet throughout the land!' Cry aloud and say: 'Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities! Raise the signal to go to Zion! Flee for safety without delay!' For I am bringing disaster from the north, even terrible destruction." "A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of the nations has set out. He has left his place to lay waste your land. Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant."

Jeremiah looks at him and says, "You've done this, you better turn or else guess what's coming. From the north is going to come a lion and that lion is going to be Babylon and it's going to be led by Nebuchadnezzar and he's going to come in and he's going to destroy everything. He's going to lay Jerusalem to waste. That's the warning. Will you heed it? Because all of us deal with sin and all of us deal with the consequences of sin.

Here's my question for you. As you think about the sounding alarm, the warnings, are you listening to those? Are you heeding those? There's not a doubt in my mind there's some of us who, we think about playing with fire a little bit. Thinking "Man if I could just get away with it? Nobody will find out." Heed the warning, put it down, step away. We don't want to do that. That's why we read God's word, as 2 Timothy reminds us that it's good for teaching, correction and reproof, and training and righteousness. We hide it in our heart so that we don't sin against him. The reason this entire book exists is so that it points to God, and how we get to him through Jesus Christ. And it shows us the standard for living, and that's the reason we do Bible studies, and that's the reason we do Join the Journey, and that's the reason we gather and listen to somebody preach, so that we can be challenged by the Word of God to tuck it away, to be warned of what it looks like to walk away from this and to walk away from God and to go dig a hole and try to find water somewhere else other than the Living Water, right? Are you going to listen? Are you hearing the warning? There's a warning.

Nation of Israel failed to listen to it. Ezekiel tried to get creative with it. He would tell stories, he would draw pictures in the sand. He talked about the nation wearing shackles. One time he said, "Just imagine shaving your head and you took a third of the hair and threw it in the fires of Israel. And then you took another third of the hair that you shaved off, and you cut it with the sword. And then you took another third of the hair and some of it you put in your pocket because some of you are going to be saved. You're going to be a remnant, and the rest of you burn." He said "That's what's going to happen in the nation of Israel if you don't turn around." The Proverbs make it clear, we want to walk with God the way of the fool suffers harm, suffers consequences.

So what happens, 2 Chronicles 36:17:

"He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirmed. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar."

He handed all of them to him. So can you imagine what this would look like as Nebuchadnezzar takes his armies down and he's marching against Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar's had enough, God has had enough. He's trying to grow the Babylonian empire, and this nation of Israel, this last little remnant down there in Jerusalem. That's all that stands. 2Kings tells us that as the armies approached all the people fled to Jerusalem because it was a fortified city. It had walls around it, and guess what? It took 18 months to endure the siege. Mainly probably because the Babylonians just took their time, but 18 months,

all of Jerusalem sitting in that city. Lamentations paints a picture of what this would look like as funeral sermon after funeral sermon after funeral sermon is delivered, just to paint a picture of what it would be like for 18 months living in this city.

Let me just give you a couple of ideas of how the consequences of their sin started. First of all, lodging - during the siege people from all over, all the surrounding towns would come in and seek shelter. There would be people everywhere you looked. Many would be come quickly destitute. A city that's normally used to holding a certain population, now people from all over have gathered there just for protection and there's nowhere to stay, there's nowhere to live. They're laying on the streets.

What about food and water? Well Jerusalem had an internal water supply, but what people could eat, however, would be limited to whatever supplies the city had stored for such an emergency. Regardless of how the leaders rationed the food, the finite supply would run out. They began to run out of food. They began to look around for things to eat. Lamentations even points the picture of maybe eating their own children.

Garbage. No one would really collect and take the garbage outside the city for disposal because you couldn't leave the walls because the enemy was out there. You can imagine they used it to maybe cook their food if they had any. Can you just imagine waste and garbage beginning to pile up all around for this 18 months.

And that leads us to human waste, sanitation, hygiene. There's no taking it outside of the city either. People will not be able to keep themselves clean, utensils clean, clothes clean, anything clean. Archeologists have indicated they had every kind of parasite you can imagine -- ringworm, rip worm, all kinds of disease. They began to die. What do you think they did with the corpses? They couldn't take them outside the city. Some suggest they probably just threw them over the walls. The consequences of sin have hit Israel. It's hit them. Now they are in the middle of this gross siege. You would almost rather Nebuchadnezzar just come and knock the walls down to get them out of their own filth. And that's what takes place.

It says in verse 18 it says:



“He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the Lord’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.”

They finally broke through and when they did they just took everything. There are passages that remind us, tell us descriptively of how they just completely laid waste to the city. I mean it is in ruin. The walls are down, the temple is down, they’re taking gold, they’re taking silver, they’re taking everything valuable and they’re taking it back to Babylon. But that’s not the only thing they’re taking. He says this in verse 20:

“He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its Sabbath rest; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed and fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.”

Finally, not only did they take all the gold and silver, some survive, a few escape to Egypt. We don’t know much about them. A few live in absolute poverty there in Jerusalem and Judea with the city wiped out. But most of them are

going to be taken into captivity. The remnant's going to be taken back to Babylon and that's where they're going to live. And the scripture says they're going to live there for 70 years. Why 70 years? Because the text makes it clear that the land needed rest and the nation of Israel had failed to do what God said. He said, "Hey after 7 years you give the land rest." They didn't do it, and so now God was killing two birds with one stone. "You're going to have consequences for your sin, which is exile, and it's going to be for 70 years. And I'm going to give the land its rest that I told you to give it."



So Nebuchadnezzar marches in, he's going to take a remnant, and here's where the remnant have to go. They go from Jerusalem to Babylon. And it's in this timeframe that we get some incredible stories. But the main storyline of this exile timeframe is this. Is

that guys like **Daniel give leadership and they encourage faithfulness among the exiles for the next 70 years.** Guys like Daniel are going to rise up, they're part of the remnant that's going to be taken to Babylon and they're going to raise up and they're going to offer leadership and they're going to give encouragement, and they're going to say "You've got to stay faithful. To all you exiles we've still got to be faithful for the next 70 years." That's what takes place, and these people are beaten up, they're sad, you can imagine the discouragement. Think about all the people that would be born during this time period, this 70 years. They don't know Jerusalem, they don't know the temple, they don't know the feasts, they don't know the way of life, the sacrifices. They have no idea about that. And they're going to be born into this foreign land with foreign cultures and foreign gods, not that that's a big deal because they were worshipping them before, but now they're going to get a good taste of homesickness, aren't they? You have Psalms like Psalm 137 that show us just how sad they were. Listen to this:

*"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for
songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of*

the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

You can hear the Babylonians mocking them. They're saying, "Oh don't cry. Why don't you just sing us one of those songs. Tell us about how great it is. Remember Zion, remember Jerusalem that we just laid to waste. Sing us a song why don't you." To which they responded, "We can't. How do we sing a song when we're in a foreign land." Matter of fact he goes on and says:

"If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you."

You hear the sadness? They're in the middle of exile and there's not a doubt in my mind there are some of right here in this room, we're in the middle of it. We're in the middle of suffering through some consequences. We've made some bad decisions. We find ourselves in the exile. We could sing this song ourselves. We feel far from God, we feel forgotten. We're trying to remember what the good days were like. And that's why a guy like Daniel has to rise up. A guy like Ezekiel has to rise up. Because in this time period they're going to cry out and say, "You have to stay faithful." Listen to me. It's during the exile that people want to quit. It's when you're suffering and you're in the middle of your consequences that people want to quit and they want to give up, and they say it's not worth it. I'm out." Listen to me. Daniel shows up and he says "You don't quit Israel. You're suffering justly for what you did, but you don't quit." And so right up front in the book of Daniel he gives encouragement by reminding them there were three fellows - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He goes, "They were taken with me. Nebuchadnezzar grabbed us, he put us in our court, he was going to raise us up according to his ways. But us four, we decided we weren't going to do that. We were going to do what God would want us to do," and sure enough, they rose to the top. They were the cream of the crop of all of the people they brought in. And then all of a sudden Nebuchadnezzar gets this idea to build a big statue out of gold and he says, "Everyone's going to worship me." But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said, "We're not going to worship him. We may be in exile and we may be in a foreign land, but we're not worshipping anybody but our God." And Daniel tells the story that Nebuchadnezzar was so mad that he threw them into the fiery furnace, and they didn't die. But another figure showed up and it was to let them know "You may be in exile, and you may be tormented, and you may be in the middle of the consequences of your sin, but listen to me, God is with us. God is with us. It may not feel like it, but you need to know it. He is with us."

Or Daniel, just a few chapters later as he sits back and he's risen to this chief leadership of Babylon and the kings change and so it's Darius and Darius likes Daniel a lot. But the other people don't like Daniel, and so they come up with this bogus law that says, "If you pray to anybody but Darius for the next 30 days we're going to throw you in the lion's den." They knew exactly what was going to happen because Daniel would be faithful, even in the exile, even in the



consequences he was praying, he was pressing in, he was doing what was right. He got caught, Darius didn't want to do it, but he threw him in the lion's den, and when he threw him in the lion's den we get this incredible picture of what it's like for God to show that he is still with you. He's still with you, even in the consequences. Even in the exile. Even when we're far, and there's not a doubt in my mind that all of us could probably attest to the fact that I strayed, I wandered, but God was ever near. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine the encouragement of that? You're suffering through those consequences, but you're finding out God hasn't forgotten about you. God still loves you, he's trying to restore you, and you find out that the consequences of sin aren't to show that he doesn't love you, but to show that he loves you immensely. Right? Isn't that what consequences are for? To show that we love and that we're not just wanting your behavior to change, but we're wanting your heart to change. We're wanting your heart to change.

Daniel continues his book and he prays and in chapter 9 he's praying and praying and praying, and saying "God don't forget us, bring us back, restore us." And finally God speaks to him and he says, "Daniel, guess what? After the allotted time you're going to get to go back and you're going to rebuild the city,

and you're going to rebuild the walls, and you're going to rebuild the temple." But watch this, "Even further out, there's going to be a guy who's going to show up and he's my anointed one. And that anointed one is going to die, and when he dies he's going to reaffirm my covenant with you." Guess who he's talking about? Jesus. That's pretty cool, isn't it? Or Ezekiel, as Ezekiel has that famous vision in chapter 37, as he looks over the valley and there's nothing but dry bones in there. And he says, "All of a sudden the bones started to shake and they started to clank, and then all of a sudden they started growing flesh and ligaments, and then they were fully people. And then God breathed life into them." And then he says, "That's exactly what you'll be like Israel. God's going to breathe life back into you. Don't quit, don't give up. God is with you."

Sometimes in the exile we want to quit, we want to give up, we want to bail out. Anthony Tomasino in his book on the exile, he says this: "Usually it's not our triumphs, but our tragedies that most profoundly shape our character. In times of disaster we're forced to look within ourselves and take stock of our beliefs. We reassess our priorities, we reach out to our neighbors, and link arms with our brothers and sisters. We resolve to meet the future with a deeper commitment to the things that truly matter. Our core values. Our victories may be invigorating, but our tragedies can be transforming." Isn't that good? Where are you at right now? If you're in the middle of exile are you going to let it be transforming or are you going to quit? If you're struggling through the middle of your consequences are you bailing out, or are you just mad, or are you going to press in and link arms with somebody and say "Mentor me through this. Help me through it, show me God's word." Don't quit. Even in the midst of it. We press in, we remain faithful, and that's what Daniel and Ezekiel and others were encouraging him to do.

The 70 years go by and then the chronicler tells us in chapter 36, verse 22:

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing."

The Babylonians are now destroyed, we have the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, they make a mistake, king gets cocky, the Persians rise up and now you have Cyrus. And Cyrus is going to make a completely political move. He's going to try to befriend everybody. He says, "All of y'all just go on home. Rebuild your temples, rebuild your walls, worship your God." That's fine. This is how it's recorded in verse 23:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any one of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them.’”

And then you’ve got guys like Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah 70 years later, after that initial overtaking of the city, they begin to go back. Some of them are reluctant, they’ve made a home in Babylon. Others are ready to go. And they immediately jump in and they go and they start rebuilding the temple, and they start rebuilding Jerusalem. And that leads us to the storyline of the return. And the storyline of the return is this: **Ezra leads the people back from exile to rebuild Jerusalem.** Ezra leads the people back from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. And as he leads them with Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, they set the altar of the temple, they get the walls fixed, they go gate by gate. That’s what the book of Nehemiah is all about is how they rebuild the walls, and you can imagine this isn’t just a rebuilding of a city. It’s got to be the rebuilding of a people. They just got through suffering the consequences of their sin and consequences and discipline are to change our heart. And one of my favorite passages in all of scripture is Nehemiah chapter 8. After they’ve built the temple, after they’ve built the wall and it’s all hanging, and they’ve gone through so much stuff, they wanted to quit, but they didn’t and they built the wall. Ezra stands up in front of everybody, he calls them all together, man, woman and child. They’re all standing there and he plops the book of the law right there on the podium. These people haven’t seen this, they haven’t gotten a chance to corporately worship. This is brand new for a lot of them. Matter of fact, some of them have never heard the Word read before because they’ve been in exile for 70 years. You know what he does? He starts to read. It says, “For a quarter of the day he read.” He just read the Bible. You think my sermons are long? Get a load of that. (congregation laughs). And you know what their response was? It wasn’t going to sleep. It says this, “And for the next quarter of the day they wept and they worshiped and they confess their sin.” Have you ever been there? Have you ever been there after the consequences or in the middle of them, you just sit back and you cry out to God, “I’m sorry, I blew it.” You just confess, you seek his forgiveness and his grace. Matter of fact, the people as Ezra was reading it, they had to go around and say, “Guys don’t cry. This is a happy day. We’re back.” Their heart was changing, you hope it was changing as they began just to realize their sin and confess it. They were looking for restoration. They were back in the land, but isn’t that just the microcosm of the big story of the scripture, isn’t it? Because we all sin. Romans 3 makes it clear we all sin. Romans 6 says we all have the consequences of sin and that’s death or separation from God. But the beauty of it is, is that in order to return to him, in order to be reconciled to God, what needs to happen? Jesus, according to Romans 5 has to die on behalf of us, and

while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He took our consequence, that ultimate consequence of being separated from God. And Ephesians 2 makes it clear it is by grace through faith you have been saved. And we can be reconciled, we can return to God, we can embrace his grace and his mercy, his love and his compassion even when we've blown it, even when we make mistakes we press through and we recognize he has absorbed our consequence. And we love him. And we say, "God how do I live a life that honors you", right? Isn't that what it's about? It's about going into exile knowing we're far from God and Jesus recalling us and reconciling us back to him.

A couple of years after I'd done the whole house burning incident, thankfully nothing crazy went down. Just a bunch of smoke - I had to replace a stove top. I was in East Texas with my cousins. We were outside playing and there was a window open to a house and they all started to go in it, but in my mind I got to thinking about what had happened before and the exile I was in, and I thought, "No, I know the end of that story." (congregation laughs). So I went home and sure enough - or I didn't go home I went to my uncle's house. I remember just a few moments after being there, they finally figured it out, like "Where are the rest of the kids?" And I said, "Well . . ." and I had to rat them out, right? I'll never forget going home my mom and dad were saying, "Thank you for making the right choice. That's why we had to punish you, that's why there was discipline, so that you would make the right decision. You would be changed." So that we wouldn't fall into that same trap over and over again. And the thing that I did wrong was this, this is where I failed. Where I failed was I should have told all those guys, "Hey fellas, we need to get out of there. We don't need to do that. I know this story, I know how it ends, you don't want any part of it, let's go." And there are some of us who've been through the warnings, we've been through the consequences, we've been reconciled, and there are some of us that could tell some incredible stories as we look at the next generation and say, "Be better than me. Don't do what I did. Follow God." We just need to be vulnerable and tell them where we struggled, tell them where we failed, tell them where God rescued us, and tell them "Be better than me."

I remember my dad after 30 years of working on the railroad, he would get called at all times in the middle of the day or night, and that short little walk from the back door to the back of the car, it didn't matter when it was he'd always ask me to go with him. He would redo his overnight kit, give me his dirty clothes, he'd put new clothes in, redo his paperwork before he would leave, and that walk from the back door to the trunk of his car, every time he would say, "Russell, be better than me. I don't want you to have to do this. Finish college." Do this, do that, don't make this mistake, don't do this, be better than me. I don't know how many times I heard that lecture, and there are many of us that need to be pouring into the next generation, "Be better than me. Be

better than me. Don't do what I did. Don't make the same mistake," help us out, right?

So they're happy, they've made it back. I can just imagine what their songs were like now as in Psalm 137, they were unable to sing, but now in Psalm 136 we see that they are restored, they're ready to worship. Listen to what Psalm 136 says:

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever."

Are you starting to get the picture of how this works? He's going to go through the entire history of Israel and after every statement they're going to cry out. "His love endures forever." And that's the way it would be read, is the guy would stand up, he would lead the praise, the *hollal*, and as he would say a phrase they would all echo back, "His love endures forever." And if there was ever a people that could shout it at the top of their lungs, it would be who? Israel. And I'm just going to take a wild guess, if there's any group of people that could shout from the top of their lungs that his love endures forever it would be us as well, isn't it?

We've seen the warning, been through the exile, and God has restored us. So will you help me finish this sermon. Would you do it. It's real easy. I just want you to say "His love endures forever." And I don't think we can do it sitting down, so would you stand up. I'm just going to read a few passages. And don't do it the boring way, I don't want any boring stuff. All right? (congregation laughs) Okay so here we go, we're going to practice right here. His love endures forever (with congregation). One more time, His love endures forever. Here we go, let's go:

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.
His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.
His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords.
His love endures forever.

And here it is, are you ready. To the one who remembered us in our lowest state.
His love endures forever.

And freed us from our enemies.
His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of heaven.
His love endures forever.

God your love endures forever and we are a testament of it. You have seen us through sin and exile, punishment consequences, you've reconciled us with your son, and God your love endures forever. For the person that's piddling in sin right now, or the person that's going through the consequences in exile, and for those of us who've seen it on the other side, God your love endures forever. And help us to embrace that as we see the story, as it unfolds and points to your son Jesus Christ who brings us all. So we put our faith and trust in Him and reconciliation with you. It's in your son's name we pray, Amen.

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