

Going Home (Introduction to Ezra-Nehemiah)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 March 2024

Preacher: Albert Tang

[0 : 00] Okay, Old Testament, Chronicles chapter 36, and we'll start from 15. Okay, so this is good, important background for the upcoming verse that we'll be talking about.

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, 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, despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of God was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.

He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed the young men with the sword in the sanctuary and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm.

God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. 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 walls of Jerusalem. They burnt all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the king of Persia came to power.

[1 : 16] The land enjoyed its Sabbath rest. All the time of its desolation it rested, until the 70 years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.

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.

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 of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them. Now flipping to Israel. If you guys don't know where that is, that is just right next door.

So here we go. 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.

[2 : 28] This is what Cyrus, king of Persia, says. The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdom of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a temple for him in Jerusalem and Judah.

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.

Moxie. Thank you. Thank you. Right.

I'm supposed to give introduction to the background of Israel. Okay. So going home, that's the message.

Remember a song, you know, old people, old person like me, remember old songs. There's a song called Country Roads Take Me Home. How many of you know that song?

[3 : 29] Don't, you're old people, right? Yeah. Country roads take me home. Now that song, if you knew the background, it was in 1972.

That was a time when in America, there was a pretty upheaval times. Vietnam Wars and hippies. It was a time that traditional values being kind of challenged.

Right? A song like this, the simplicity of like a soldier going home, going back to country home, you know, seeing parents, a simple kind of agricultural kind of home, that kind of background.

It would have been something like a stream in the desert for the people at that time. Right? I don't know what going home means for you today. I remember last, about a month or so ago, I went to Napier.

Napier, there was, I happened to be in that Chinese church, was preaching, and suddenly the leader said, oh, there are going to be 20 mainland workers be there today.

[4 : 40] Ooh. Because the boss was Christian, so he said, oh, he invited them to church. So there was suddenly, it was 20, 20 people who'd never been to church.

Right? Chinese mainlanders. So afterwards, I went to talk to them, and these guys, because they were construction workers, it was kind of quite well built, and it was dark, because they worked outside.

And, you know, you look at them, they look quite mean, you know, and, but when I was talking to them, oh, where you guys come from, this, from this province, that province, and, and they've been, they've been about a year or so away from home, and because that was just a few days before Chinese New Year, and now I was talking to them, and they was just kind of, a couple of guys actually had, almost had tears in their eyes, missing my home, missing my family.

I don't know, what, what, what, what is home for you today? Maybe for a lot of us, this is home.

Right? This is home. But for your parents, for your grandparents, maybe Hong Kong, maybe, yeah, some, I don't know, Billy, what's home for you?

This is home, right? Yeah. All right. But, some, some, some, your parents, or some, some uncles, aunties from Sunday morning service, they went home, dad said, he went home, did you go back to Hong Kong?

[6 : 14] No, you didn't, right? This is home for you, right? And, you know, and Samuel, and Sammy told me, you know, when they went back to Hong Kong, Hong Kong's not the same anymore.

It's kind of, it's a very mixed feeling. Right? What is home for you? What is going home for you?

Now, for Israel, this is the background, okay? This, this actually, Bible project, will give you a very, quite simple, it's nine minute introduction, of Israel and Nehemiah.

It's pretty, pretty brief, but pretty good. I, I, I advise you to go, and just Google, Bible project, Israel, Nehemiah, and, and this, they were just, introduced that for you.

That was pretty good. So, there was three main characters, all right? One is, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel, pretty bouncy guy, eh? Yeah, Zerubbabel, hey?

[7 : 18] Hey, sir, Rubbabel, come. Yeah. But he was, he was the governor, all right? He was the governor. And then, Ezra, and this is the main character of the book, actually, Ezra, did not, appear until chapter seven.

So, previous six chapters, it was about this, Belshasha, and Zerubbabel, the first group of people came, went back, came back home.

And second figure was Ezra, from chapter seven, okay? And later on, Pastor William and other speakers will explain, each of the, of the passages, and to, and we'll get a clearer picture.

And third is Nehemiah. That's the next book that we will explore, okay? So, this is about going home. I'm, I'm, I'm to give you some of the background.

Now, we, we, we're supposed to be still on Matthew, right? But the thing is, because William got COVID, right? And he preached on, he's supposed to preach yesterday, this morning, and today.

[8 : 25] So, I, I just really feel that, the pastor really, really good at supporting one another. So, Pastor Barry went in, he's supposed to translate, uh, the messages, last night and tomorrow, this morning for, for Barry, uh, for William.

And he said, oh, okay, why not I just step in, I'll just read his message. And what, he did quite well. And, Pastor William's message was very well written, and you'll hear it later on, okay?

And I, I said, oh, I can step in to, to preach for you on, uh, ES, right? And, but, wow, I mean, Thursday now, I can't, I can't vomit out a sermon just for two, two, three days?

No, I can't. And it was very good for him, said, well, why don't you just introduce Ezra, and we can actually have a heads up. And, and two, two, three weeks later, and you, you start Ezra.

Okay, so this is why I'm preaching this, right? But, but bear in mind, oh, bear in mind, because this is, it's very, very important information for us to understand Ezra and Nehemiah.

[9 : 29] Okay, so going home, but we, we must ask, what, when did they leave home? When did they leave home? And why did they have to leave? You know, their homeland was Jerusalem, Israel, right?

But what happened? Where did they go? Why did they have to leave? Thanks, friend, read that for us. Second Chronicle 36, it just told us the history.

So it told us why, and when did they leave? They, they, they didn't want to leave. They was, they were, yeah, they were captured.

Jerusalem was captured. and people was deported, right? And exiled away to Babylon. And that was, that was the artist's impression of, of the situation.

It would be pretty bad. The whole place was desolated. They took the best of their people away. All right? And, and, and just for the old ones, the weak ones, the, unskilled, left in Jerusalem.

[10:38] Can you imagine? Everything was desolated, ruined. City planning, medical, structural, anything, anything, was ruined.

Just gone. And no skilled people was left there. Can you imagine? It's worse than, some of the worst parts of the third world.

Right? That would be like that. So that was, that was the reason they had to leave home. Okay? And, that, that is, that was, second, Chronicles 36, 20, 20, 15 to 21.

That was the description of the situation. All right? But, God, according to his promise, he wanted them to return. Because, because due to of, due to their sin, idolatry, God was to discipline them. But God did, didn't just enjoy the disciplining. His plan was to bless. He was not there to punish. Right?

[11:51] The reason to punish for them to return back to him. All right? If they did not discipline the people, the people would just get worse and worse and further away from him.

So he had to step in and do something. So he used, allowed their enemies to capture them, tie them to exile, and they had to learn, they had to learn the lesson.

All right? We would not want to worship other gods forever. That was a very hard lesson to learn. And God, according to his promise, he brought them home.

That was in verses 22 and 23, what friend had said to us. And how did they return? God used the new empire, the king of the new empire.

Now, they were captured by Babylon. But after that, Babylon was actually taken over by Persia king, the kingdom of Persia.

[12:58] And the first king was called Cyrus. And the policy of Persia is quite different to the policy of Babylon.

And Persia, they used the open kind of policy that allowed you rule your own people. I allow you to have freedom so that when you have freedom, you do your own things, and you're thankful to me, you'll be loyal to me.

That was how God in his wisdom, beyond time, he could see what was going to happen. So, God used even kingdoms, kings, to fulfill his purpose.

Chapter 36, 22-23, also Jeremiah 29, 10-11 says something like that. I'll give you some sort of timeline impression.

I think some of the dates, I think as Christians, some of the dates we need to remember. There are lots of dates in the Bible, but some I think you have to remember.

[14:11] after attending church for 10 years, 20 years, there are certain numbers we need to know. We don't need to know everything, but I think something like 722, we need to know.

That is the northern kingdom being captured, right? It was downfall of the Israel kingdom, 722. Some said 721. It's okay. It's not too bad. One or two years. Now, that's the best of the United Monarchy. That's the best of the Israel kingdom.

That's David, Solomon, right? But after that, the kingdom split it in two. So, northern kingdom, Israel, southern kingdom, Judah, all right?

And 721 or 722, Israel was captured by Assyria. And 200 years later, 150 something years later, Jerusalem was captured and exiled, all right?

[15:15] And then, this is, after 50 years, something happened. That was in Ezra 3, the first group of people returned from Babylon.

We're building the altar, that's Ezra 3. And then, Ezra, no, and then they, they, they kind of started rebuilding the altar, but they stopped.

Because there were some oppositions. But, some years later, 16, 17 years later, God raised the prophet Haggai and reminded the people, hey, build, to build what you have started.

It's only taken four years for them to build a temple. It's supposed to be four years, but it takes 20 years to complete. They kind of halted, the project was halted.

All right? So that was, that was the first book of Ezra, Ezra, that we'll be looking into. And the second, the second part is from chapter 7 to 10, that's the return of Ezra himself, the scribe. [16:31] Okay? And then, 12 years later, that's not Ezra, that's Nehemiah. Nehemiah. Okay? And Nehemiah came back and rebuilt the temple.

So these are where the two books that we're covering. These are the years, all right? And then after that was 400 silent years until Christ came. All right?

Kind of get an impression where the two books lie. Okay? So that's why God allowed the enemies to capture them, teaching them lesson, not to worship any false gods, foreign gods, and they learned their lessons.

All right? And then God brought them back home. That's why, that's how God did it. God, and God, in Ezra chapter 1 verses 1 to 2, he says that in the first year, the Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of God spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation towards Israel, and also to put in the writing, this is to allow them to go home, appoint people to build Jerusalem, the temple.

Now, that was God's plan, that was God's wisdom, and God's power enabled this to happen. All right? So it was not just fate, it was not just because the enemies overpowered Israel, it was all in God's plan.

[18:09] I think it really reminds us that all things that happened to me, to my life, first I might need to ask, is there something God wants me to learn, some lesson?

Is there something that I've done wrong, I need to repent? Or if it's not, something God knows better for me, in my life.

He's able to use anything in this world to accomplish his plan. The sufferings that we have, it's very complicated.

We can't just explain it one or two reasons. Some may be caused by sin, yes, but may not be all the time. Maybe it's just something that we don't understand.

But one thing we know, God is sovereign. All right? God is able to use anything to accomplish his will. So we need to come back to him.

[19:09] And that's why the people, they had to come home to see the great plan of God. And going home itself is fulfilling God's plan for the people of Israel.

Right? And that was the Cyrus cylinder. Now, what is that? What was that? It's actually, the wordings there actually was the commands of the king of Persia to allow people to come back to their land.

That's the cylinder, you know, when you inscribe all these stuff on there and then roll it and print out. Something like that, even now, during our time, when I was a kid, I see people rolling out those ink into a printer and roll out and print something out.

That was a cylinder, actually, the archaeologists discovered that as in, actually, in the British Museum at the moment. So, yeah, that was God's way using his servant.

Actually, Isaiah 55 says something, Cyrus, my servant. So, God was able to accomplish his will through the king who didn't even know him. So, God is sovereign.

[20:30] We can trust in him. All right? That's where, how they came back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

All right? There was about three groups of people actually came. Now, chapter 2, Pastor William preached that last night and this morning. Barry, Barry read his sermon.

It was very fascinating. A lot of numbers, 70-something verses. We just think, wow, I can't even read those names, you know, and I can't remember those numbers.

But it was very interesting how the author of Ezra recorded that in details. It had all very special meanings, right?

the first, there was three groups that went back. The first would be Belshazzar and then Zerubbabel. That would be the first group.

[21:34] And chapter 2 recorded was 49,000 something. Very exact. Okay? The second group will be Ezra. Third group will be Nehemiah.

So it's about three groups that returned. And a matter of, it's not just a short time essentially. If you read one, the second group went back, it was after 57 years.

And then another 12 years. So it's more or less about 70 something years that the people returned. Just look at the distance. Okay?

This bit is 100k. How many 100k is there? About 2,000 k's? If you round about that, it's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 6, 6, at least about 1,500 k's?

From Cape Ranga to Dunedin, it was about 1,700 k's. That's around about that. That's from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

[22 : 40] And how long would it take? And you see they had cameras, animals, and donkeys, and all this gold, silver, and all these different articles that they had to bring back.

Now, in chapter 7, Ezra told us that it took them five months. From first day of first month, and they arrived to Jerusalem on the first day of May, the first month.

so five months, 20, of course they rest here and there. They don't just arrive at night, sleep, and then next day walk.

I think it would be very, very tiring for a lot of us this week, right? Yeah, so that, we can appreciate the journey, the difficulty of the time.

And also, I tell you what, going back to Jerusalem, even though there was a large amount of people, but comparatively, the percentage is quite small.

[23 : 56] Because lots of people would rather stay back in Babylon, right? Maybe two, even three generations passed.

It would be their grandchildren, all right? Those returning, probably, they would be at least the second, or some would be the third generations.

And they really would have the heart before it was willing to go back to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem was a place, a city of ruin.

Okay? I remember when I was about 20 something, 21, I went back to my place where I was born, Fan Heng Ha, okay?

And it was early, it was, there was early 80s, 80, 81. Okay? Those times, China, or Heng Ha, was pretty, pretty hard, those place during those times.

[25 : 06] We had to take televisions, washing machines from Hong Kong, across the border, take those to them, because there was none over there.

Okay? I had to wake up four o'clock in the morning, go to the train station. It was heaps of people, you know? And then I went back to my hometown, Heng Ha.

this is my hometown, you know? There was no toilets at home. I had to go out to the public toilets. I was very careful watching every step, you know? It was like that. Similar. Not many would probably want to go from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

for those who went, they would really have the passion and knew the heart of God. And they had to go and they had a mission to rebuild.

[26 : 14] Right? So, why to return? Yes, they were there to rebuild. King Cyrus made the decree that they would go back to build the temple and the city.

Okay? But I believe it was more than that. It was God's will for them to go back. Because God's purpose was not to punish them.

You know, Jeremiah 29, 10 to 11, I mean, we know verse 11 very well. for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you.

I mean, we quote this all the time, right? But the context was not for you. The context was for the people of Israel during exile.

God says, wait, 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will bring you back according to what I promised to you. Because what I promised to you, my plan was not to harm you, was to prosper you, was to build you up.

[27 : 25] But because you were far away from me, you were worshipping false gods, I need to do something so that I bring you back to me. Right? That was being exiled to the foreign land was a means that God should discipline his people.

Because if he did not do that, people would just left God altogether. And sometimes when we suffer and we blame God, God, why you did it on me?

Why you do this on me? God is doing this because he loves us. He wants to prosper us. He's not to harm us. Give us hope in the future.

That was what God wanted to do. And he fulfilled his good promise. and brought them back. And they were going back to Jerusalem. Yes, very tangible thing was to build the temple.

But I believe God wants much more than that. If they have already built the temple, but if their heart was not right, their lives were not rebuilt, meaningless.

[28 : 37] goodness. I think any project without knowing, appreciating the love of God. When God said in Jeremiah 31, 3, I've loved you with an everlasting love.

I have drawn you with my unfailing kindness. This is God for his people and for us. I mean, we can have built a new church building.

We can make this a very grand thing. But if our hearts are not right for God, it means nothing. And indeed, if we read in Ezra and Nehemiah, they have built the temple, they have rebuilt the temple, they have rebuilt their walls, right?

But somehow, you'll find that in these two books, they have succeeded building, but somehow there was some anticlimaxes there.

They have built up the temple and Ezra went back and taught the laws to the people, but somehow they forced the people to divorce their wives, their foreign wives.

[29 : 59] It's something that's not quite harmonious. And then when they have rebuilt the walls, and the people were still breaking the laws towards the end of Nehemiah, they're still buying and selling on Sabbath.

And even worse, the priests were sinning. You can read them all in these two books. So, why would these authors record these things?

It somehow seems that they're looking for something more, something deeper, and something more in the future.

And that would be the Messiah King. that is anticipating to come. Now, that was Jeremiah 31 to 34, actually.

And that was what was described. God said, I want to put a new heart. I want to start a new, to make a new covenant.

[31 : 11] I will put my laws in their minds and write it on their hearts. It will be something, not just the temple, not just the Jerusalem walls, okay?

It will be something, a new thing in their hearts. Who could do that? Ezra couldn't do it. Nehemiah couldn't do it. The coming Messiah will.

And we know Jesus, Jesus was the Messiah. Right? And he escaped. And he and we believed him. All right? So that, that's our home. In Luke 15, Jesus taught another story about coming home.

And we all know the story. the prodigal son. All right? The return of the prodigal son. But when this prodigal son returned, the father has found there's another prodigal son at home.

[32 : 20] That's their elder brother. And the Jews would know Jesus was talking about them. The Jews were their elder brothers. All the times there was you know, there was keeping the laws, doing this, everything was good, but everything was done for themselves.

They never knew the father's heart. Comparing to the Gentile people, they were willing to come to the Lord and accept the salvation.

These Jews, they had to come back to the father's heart. And they had to know the will and the love of God.

So, I think this is our theme for this year. I think it's a lot of reflection for me. When we say about how do we cooperate or how do we serve a unit, how do we keep the unity with brothers and sisters, sisters, I think I must come home first.

I must come back to the father. It's not about building up the structure or the administrative process, how to refine our policies.

[33 : 43] I think any policies would have flaws in my heart. Right? Right? I'm getting a bit emotional here.

I think this past week, I've experienced very beautiful pictures about people willing to lay down ourselves and willing to just see the father's heart and willing to give up my comfort rights just to go an extra mile to help one another.

On Tuesday, we had a Wednesday, we actually had meetings. We had a meeting with other church pastors, CACC, Holy Word. You know, a group of pastors, we can just share and we just, yeah, our difficulties and how we prayed, how we could support one another.

And CACC, because they only left down to about half, half time pastor this year. So, we just really felt for them and Pastor Barry and William and us, we said, oh, let's go and help them with the sermons.

And I just feel that, I mean, we're pretty good here in PCPC, we don't need to worry about CACC, their own business, it's nothing to do with us. But no, it's not just about us, it's about the kingdom of

God.

[35 : 22] So, I'm very touched by Barry and William and others, and Holy Words, the pastors from Holy Words, let's go and help them.

Right? And on Thursday, we had a late Deacon Zoom meeting. I mean, we wanted to solve something, but at the end, the conclusion was we cannot conclude together.

Because we do not have a consensus, right? Because we do not want to override others, we don't want to win over others. And so, we conclude that this is our conclusion.

No conclusion was the conclusion. But that was alright. Everybody was hearing other people's hearts. That was so beautiful.

I'm so glad that I can serve with people like Vincent, Cindy, Anthony, and William, and Barry.

[36 : 32] I count it such a blessing to serve in this such a blessed teamwork. I could die for it.

Appreciate Isaac was serving in that role for three years. Gave us a lot of, yeah, I think it was good for the church. And even for this sermon arrangements, you know, it was, pastors were so willing to step out of our ways to help one another.

So beautiful. I mean, there are still problems there, still chaos, there are still things we cannot solve. Right? But as long as we go back to the Father's heart, to understand, to know the Father's will, God will not kick out our enemies in a short time, but he is here.

He's able to help us. He's able to empower us to just go through anything. So I encourage you, I think the most important thing is for me to go back, to really know, to really taste the everlasting and failing kindness of God.

And then we'll make this body of Christ a more lovely place.

[38 : 21] And it will bring glory to God. Let's go home. Go back to the Father's arms and be loved by him.

Let's pray. Father, I just want to thank you. We're just, yeah, fallible beings. I have my shortcomings, but I just want to thank you that in you there is everlasting love, there's unfailing kindness that I can always fall back to.

And, yeah, to experience that love that I can be strengthened to love one another. Thank you, Jesus, in your precious name.

Amen.