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Ezra 1:1–4, ESV

1 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.”

We will return from exile.

There are two books of the Bible, in the middle of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, that concern the return of the exiled Jews from Babylon. They are the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were actually one book originally, and were probably not divided into two books until the third century A.D. It is these two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, that contain almost

all we know about the years that followed the return from exile of the Israelites. Remember that around 597 B.C., Babylon captured Jerusalem and sent the leaders of the Israelites into exile far away, deep into the kingdom of Babylon. The leader of the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar, did this to the leaders of all the nations he conquered; it was his way of trying to keep people from organizing themselves and rising up against their conquerors. But in about 538 B.C., around 40 years later – although some say it was more like 70 years, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. So, there was a new king, Cyrus, and he thought just the opposite, that happy people who have their own homeland and their own religion are less likely to rise up. So, he set free all his captives from various conquered nations, including the leaders of the Israelites. This consisted of a large number of people, many thousands of them, a good

portion of the population of Israel. These were the educated people, the leaders of the temple, influential people, as well as the actual government leaders. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us what happened when the Israelites returned home.

The first thing they did was rebuild their Temple. The Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, had not allowed those who remained in Israel to have a temple, and they were not allowed to openly practice their faith. But Cyrus, the Persian king, wanted them happy, and so he encouraged them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Here is what our quote says, and I have abbreviated it: ***1** In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, 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.

³ *Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem.”* This puts it very simply:

the king of the people who had conquered the Babylonians, and who now ruled over the Israelites, let the Israelites go home and he ordered them to rebuild their temple to God.

Once again, the Israelites would gather in their house of worship and honor their God.

Here is what we are told happened when the new temple was finished and the people of Israel gathered to dedicated the new temple: ¹⁶ *And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.* ¹⁷ *They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs,*

and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses. The priests, of course, were the spiritual leaders of the Israelites. The Levites, by the way, were the descendants of the Tribe of Levi, one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They held important roles in the temple, including singing Psalms, maintaining the temple, and performing a number of other ceremonial tasks. They were a family of holy people whose primary goal in life was to support the people as they worshipped God in the temple.

Now, we are in exile right now, unable to gather together in our church. When we get back together, we will not offer God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs and a dozen male goats.

But we will celebrate. I'm not a Levite, and in fact, I do not maintain our church, and I don't lead us in song. I'm not a priest, either, not in our terminology. But I am pastor of this church, and as your reverend, I await the day when the proclamation comes down – and I am once again able to lead us all in worship of our God in our church.

It is often asked why God let the Israelites be taken captive. Remember that in the Old Testament, God frequently uses the actions of humans to serve his purpose. The Israelites, who later became the Jews, typically saw God's hand in whatever happened to them. When an army conquered them, it was God punishing them for not following their covenant with God, for straying from their faith, for living hedonistic lives and no longer living in a way that showed a respect for God and laws of God. When they were freed from captivity, it was seen

as God granting them forgiveness and acknowledging that they had turned back to God and were now living the way they had been commanded. But there is another take on this, and that is that God didn't have the Israelites taken captive or allow the Israelites to return home to Jerusalem because of anything they did. Rather, it was God, making it clear that God is indeed the one and only creator, that the gentiles of the world needed to look up and pay attention. The people of God, the chosen people, had to leave so that they could be seen returning to their homeland and rebuilding their temple. This way, all people everywhere would see that there is only one true God and that God's people will always return to God. This message is meant for all people and at all times, including now.

We've looked at the Book of Isaiah, which comes later in the Bible. Remember that the prophets spoke for God, warning

the Israelites when they were drifting away from their God and promising them God's love and protection when they followed the laws of their Lord. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah contain prophecies of the prophet Isaiah. He was active between 742 and 687 B.C. At the time, the southern part of Israel was once again under the domination of a conquering nation, this time, Assyria, which was to the northeast. Isaiah was particularly interested in social justice, faith in God, rewards for those who followed God, and God's horrific judgement on those who disobeyed God. Here is a quote from Chapter 11 of Isaiah: ¹²

He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. This is a prophecy of Isaiah, and he is declaring that God will gather all the banished people of God and bring them home. Just as God led the Israelites out of

Egypt and into the promised land, and just as God led the Israelites out of Babylonia and into Israel, God will one day bring all of God's people together in the name of God to honor our God.

We're going to do our little part to live out this prophecy. We will return. I am looking forward to the day when I will once again stand in our sanctuary, on the platform, before the altar of God, in a building that exists only for one purpose, and that is to remember why we exist. We are here to be the voice of God on this planet. We are here to show that Jesus Christ was right. Jesus did not collect wealth or claw his way to power. Jesus did not live on the backs of others. Jesus did not mingle with the leaders of society, those who were worshipped for their fame and influence. Jesus collected around him a group of common people. Jesus embraced those who had

done wrong and who regretted their actions. He made a point of associating with the people that society did not value. This included women; remember that the genders were segregated in his society, with men calling the shots. He also showed great love for the poor, for those who were had infectious diseases, who were disabled, or who were mentally ill. He embraced and forgave a centurion, a Roman soldier who had turned to God, even though the Romans had conquered his people. He showed love for ethnic minorities who were hated, including the Samaritans. Jesus showed a particular fondness for children, who like women, were held in low regard in his culture.

That is how we will return, as the people of God who believe in empathy for those who are suffering, forgiveness for those who have done us wrong, and love for all humans. When

we gather once again in our sanctuary, we will acknowledge that God wants us there. God wants us in our church.

Ezra led a caravan of his people back from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. Many had to walk the distance of nine hundred miles. It probably took about four months. This was not an army; it was a collection of families, with the elderly and with children. They traveled northwest, out of Babylon, then east to the Mediterranean Sea, then south along the sea to Jerusalem. We can get on a plane and travel nine hundred miles in about an hour and a half. We can drive nine hundred miles in a very long day. I drove eleven hundred miles, I believe, when I moved here from southern California. But back in Ezra's time, it was an enormous distance, covering much of their known world. To us, right now, our journey home might seem like an enormous hurdle to overcome, to return to our church and to

return to the life we had before. We don't know yet exactly what it will look like. We don't know what will have changed when this is all over. But we do know that we will rebuild our temple and we will once again do the most important thing we can do: come together as God's people, as the followers of Jesus Christ - the most human person who has ever existed. Please pray with me.

God, we wait to come home. We wait to make that journey through the desert, with our animals, our families, our worldly possessions. We will make our journey, truthfully, in our hearts and minds, and not with our feet. But to us, it will be as real, as long-awaited, as glorious as the return of Ezra's people to the land their God gave to them. When we get there, we ask that we be lifted up, that we feel the joy of freedom, of being back where we belong, of being with each other so that

we can once again support each other in person. God, we ask that all people everywhere discover that they, too, need to make that journey back to you. And for many people on this planet, God, we know that they need to make that trip for the very first time, so that they can come to understand that the things of this world are not the things of your world. May we all gather one day, as a global community, in your name, in peace, love, forgiveness, empathy, and with a determination that we will live by the same law by which Jesus lived. That law is that there is only one God, and that all of God's people are equal in God's name, and that no human is to be cast aside as insignificant or unwanted. And we thank you, God, for the knowledge that yes, we will return. Amen.