

RETURN FROM EXILE

Luke 4:16-21

This Sunday marks the first time we have worshipped together in person since Sunday, March 15. This is the first time we have been able to be together in eighty-nine days.

Eighty-nine days...

Even though being together today is an exciting, celebratory occasion, we recognize that things are still 'off' - we cannot, for example, all gather together as we did before March 15th. Although exciting, our return is not yet complete.

I have been thinking about this Sunday for a couple weeks and about its mixture of both excitement and incompleteness. Those thoughts kept bringing to my mind the response of the people who laid the foundation for a temple in Jerusalem to replace the one destroyed by Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar – *“the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping”*¹ (Ezra 3:12-13). That passage, which describes life in Israel after the end of their nation’s seventy-year exile to Babylon, holds parallels for us today. So, let’s briefly consider the theme of exile in the Bible as a way of helping us think about our return to worshipping together.

Exile in the Bible

- The Bible introduces the theme of exile early in its story; it introduces it in the account of Adam and Eve.
 - God placed Adam and Eve in Eden, a special garden that housed the couple and that served as God’s dwelling place (*Genesis 2:7-8; 3:8*).
 - Adam and Eve’s refusal to submit to God led to their exile from Eden (*Genesis 3:1-6, 22-24*).
 - Even though separated by many events and many years, Genesis’ story connects Adam and Eve’s exile to the establishment of Babylon (*Genesis 10:6-10*).
- Israel’s longer story replays the story of Adam and Eve’s exile.
 - Similar to what He did with Adam and Eve, God placed Israel in an Eden-like land (*Genesis 13:10; cf. Numbers 13:23-24, 27*).
 - Also similar to Adam and Eve’s story, Israel’s rebellion eventually led to exile from their land, an exile that took them to Babylon (*2 Kings 25:1-21; Jeremiah 20:3-6; 21:8-10*).

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- God, however, issued promises through the prophets to rescue and restore Israel (*cf. Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-9; Ezekiel 37:15-28*).
- While God ended Israel's captivity to Babylon after seventy years, Israel recognized that the end of its captivity was not the end of its captivity (*Nehemiah 9:36-37*); they were still waiting for the complete fulfillment of God's promises.
- The New Testament reveals the conclusion to the incomplete story of Israel's return from exile in the Hebrew Bible; it reveals how God used Jesus to end Israel's captivity (*cf. Luke 1:67-79; 4:16-21; John 14:6*).
- This brief survey of the Bible's exile theme offers the following insights:

*Israel's return from exile was an **occasion for rejoicing**.*

*Israel's return from exile was **not the end of exile**.*

*Israel's return from exile **looked forward** to a bigger, future event.*

*Jesus **ends exile** by restoring people to God's presence.*

Applications

- We can – and should – rejoice that we can gather together to worship again.
- But we recognize that things have not returned to 'normal'; our return is not yet complete.
- Even though we have not returned to our 'normal' worship, we understand that our worship together and our relationships with one another anticipate a better future reality (*cf. Hebrews 10:19-25*). We can rejoice in our imperfect present because of the confidence we have in the future God promises to us through Jesus (*cf. Hebrews 6:13-20; Revelation 21-22*).
- God's plan to restore His relationship with humanity focuses on Jesus (*cf. Colossians 1:13-20*); we must therefore be Jesus-focused people (*cf. Colossians 3:1-11*).

God calls us to reimagine our world through our understandings of His Bible. He calls us to interpret our lives through the lives of people recorded in the Bible. Learning to see our world and ourselves through Bible-shaped understandings gives us confidence because we learn to anchor our lives to the loving and faithful character of God and the promises He has made to us through Jesus. We may not be exactly where we want to be today, but we understand there is more to life than just this moment; we understand that we wait for the bigger and better future God guarantees to us through Jesus.