

For 6 months, I stepped out of ministry. It was painful decision, and even now it was the right decision.

During that season, I worked for my cousin's lawn and landscaping business.

- Connie drove a big truck because she was the only one with a driver's license.
- I was grateful for the work.
- On that zero-turn mower, I often yelled at God.
- We had done what was right and were punished for it.

I was not where I belonged; not doing what I was created to do.

We all **want our lives to matter** - young men especially.

- Even **old men**, like Caleb, who told Joshua, 'Give me this hill country ... I will drive them (the giants) out (Jos 14:12 NIV).'
- Each of us **were created** to dream, to do, and become something uniquely designed by God in our mother's womb.
- **God has sketched out** the parameters of our life. 'All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be (Ps 139:16b NIV).'

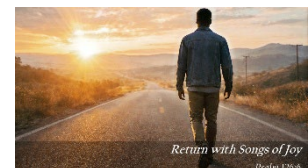
In my case, what do you do when you are not where you are supposed to be, not doing what you created to do? You return.

Return to God, and He will fill you with joy and purpose.

A delightful line in the Psalms is guiding my brief thoughts today: 'return with songs of joy (Ps 126:6 NIV).'

Return

Return with Songs of Joy, Ps 126:6



The story of my return began when a dear friend, a mentor, passed away and we went to the funeral. There – at a funeral - God encouraged us to return to who we were created to be. My assignment changed but the call was the same.

The prophet wrote, "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty (Mal 3:7 NIV).'

Our **fall sermon series** is going to be of Ezra & Nehemiah.

- It is a **story of Israel's return** to the Promised Land.
- It has so many applications for us that I am excited to dig into it.

Today, for just a few minutes, I want to pull out three takeaways from the overall story of their return.

The **first takeaway** is that God is always faithful to His promises.

1. God is Always Faithful to His Promises

Israel went into Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah went into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. This **was punishment** for *mingling true worship* with the idolatry of the surrounding nations.

But God **promised that a remnant** would return to the land.

- Jeremiah prophesied just before the exile: “‘When *seventy years* are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jer 29:10-11 NIV).”

The people of God **were away from where they were supposed** to be. **God used unholy and pagan Babylon as a tool to make the remnant holy and pure.**

Daniel was there. Daniel held onto God's promise: ‘I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. ³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes (Da 9:2-3 NIV).’

- I can almost hear Daniel praying towards Jerusalem.
- He longed to be in the Promised Land. He was not where he was supposed to be.
- **As deep as his despair was, Israel's joy would be greater on their return.**

Right on time – 70 years - God **moved the heart** of a Persian king (Babylon had been conquered by Persia): ‘In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. *He stirred the heart* of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1 NLT).’

- This **was unheard of** in a world where the victor's God was assumed to be the real God.
- Cyrus let other nationalities return, too. He even financed the restoration of their worship – returning these gods to ‘the places which make them happy.’¹

¹ Cyrus Cylinder, *ANET*, 315-16.

- All he asked for in return was that they pray for his long life.
- Interesting that not one of the post-exile prophets pronounce judgment on the Persian Empire.²

God kept his promise to Israel – and He keeps His promises to you, too. I am ‘fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises (Ro 4:21 NLT).’

The **second takeaway** from the story of Israel’s return is that **faithfulness wins**.

2. Faithfulness Wins.

They say **slow and steady wins** the race.

- **Financially**, delaying gratification and saving always pays off in the end.
- **Spiritually**, **faithfulness to God always has benefits**: growth in character, understanding, wisdom, and love for others.

In Israel’s case it **also meant financial prosperity** for many of the exiles. **Jeremiah** instructed the exiles to ‘Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, *because if it prospers, you too will prosper* (Jer 29:7 NIV).’

Seventy years later, the exiles returned – and **the numbers tell the story** of God’s blessing:

- ‘A total of 42,360 people returned to Judah, ⁶⁵ in addition to 7,337 *servants* and 200 singers, both men and women. ⁶⁶ They took with them 736 horses, 245 mules, ⁶⁷ 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys (Ezra 2:64-67 NLT).’
- ‘I weighed the treasure as I gave it to them and found the totals to be as follows: 24 tons of silver, 7,500 pounds of silver articles, 7,500 pounds of gold, ²⁷ 20 gold bowls, equal in value to 1,000 gold coins, 2 fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold (Ezra 8:26-27 NLT).’

Amazing, **these people were exiled** and had only what they could carry to Babylon - but they prospered.

- Many of them were slaves – but they were blessed.
- They lived modestly, saved and when the time came to worship by rebuilding the Temple, they were able to give generously.
- Friends, **let’s live simple lives** ‘so that you (we) can be generous on every occasion (2Co 9:11 NIV).’

² NICOT, 41.

Not everyone was generous or brave: ‘Many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions.’³ Some were unwilling to return for fear of losing what they had accumulated.

Wow. **God blesses those who are faithful.**

- But **money is only a tool** that God uses to teach us about *trusting Him*.
- Jesus taught ‘Give, and it will be given to you (Lk 6:38 NIV).’
- **If we put our trust in money, it becomes like moldy manna – stinky.**
- **God wants us to trust Him and be faithful to Him.**

The **third takeaway** is that there is great joy in returning.

3. Return Brings Great Joy.

Return to God, and He will fill you with joy and purpose.

Joy always follows return.

Isaiah prophesied: ‘Those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. *Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away* (Is 35:10 NIV).’ Isn’t that lovely? **Like children playing tag in a playground;** sorrow and sighing will run away from us while gladness and joy are chasing us.

One of those who returned to Israel **wrote a song** about it: ‘We were like those who dreamed.

²Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy ... ³The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy ... ⁵Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. ⁶Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, *will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them* (Ps 127:1b-3, 5-6 NIV).’

- God is for us (Ps 56:9).
- The **biblical principle** is that *if we return* to God, **He returns to us** (Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7, etc.).
- Let’s turn back towards God.

Jesus told a story about the prodigal’s return. The dad said, ‘we must celebrate with a feast’ and Jesus said, ‘so the party began (Lk 15:23-24 NLT).’ There is great joy in the return to where you belong and to who you were created to be.

Isaiah saw it. The psalmist sang it. Jesus illustrated it.

³ NICOT, 41. Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.8-9 tr Marcus.

Today is the day for you to return.

It won't be perfect – [even the prodigal still had chores](#) – but **it will be home**. It will be where God created you to be. Return to God, and He will fill you with joy and purpose.

Call to return and prayer.