

Spiritual Rebuilding II

The Revd Philip Wainwright

Ezra 1.1–7; 13 September 2009

Last week we began a series in which we're looking at what the Bible has to say about recovering from defeat, whether physical or spiritual, using the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament. Those books show God's Old Testament people recovering and rebuilding after a defeat worse than anything than most of us will know: invasion by foreign troops who destroy not only our defences and our homes but our churches, take us into captivity and exile as slaves, and keep us there seventy years.

Last week I showed you where these books fit into the general picture of the Old Testament, and the list we looked at is repeated in this week's leaflet, but with some additional comments so you can see where in the other books of the Bible we can find out more about this. Take a quick look at it. For those who weren't here last week, the list down to Nehemiah is pretty much history in chronological order. The rest of the list, which is prophetic and other spiritual writings, is not in chronological order, but I've added a comment showing you which of them are directly related to the exile and recovery, and to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The book of Esther is a story of hope set in the middle of exile, many of the Psalms were used or written during

the Exile and after the return. Isaiah is one of the prophets who warned people that defeat and captivity would follow if they continued to ignore God's word, and his book includes some prophetic material from the earliest days of the return. Jeremiah, who came later and lived through it is the prophet most associated with the exile. He was not taken captive himself, but went as a refugee to Egypt and died there. The book of Lamentations is a poem inspired by the horror of seeing your home town torn to bits and your neighbours killed, and is very hard reading. Ezekiel is another prophet who warned people that defeat and exile was coming, but differs from Jeremiah in that he was among the captives taken to Babylon and continued his preaching ministry in exile. Daniel is a mixture of stories and prophecies set in the period of the exile, and then lower down the list are the other prophets active during the period of the return, the period covered by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that we're going to be looking at, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. So don't be surprised if we dip into some of these books as we go through Ezra and Nehemiah; you might practice finding them in your Bible so you'll be ready!

Our reading this morning was the opening verses of the book of Ezra. If they sounded familiar, they should have; they are identical to the last three verses of II Chronicles, which we read last week. II Chronicles is

actually the last book in the Jewish Bible, which puts Ezra and Nehemiah earlier for some reason, and long ago someone copied the beginning of Ezra to the end of Chronicles so their version of the Old Testament would end with a note of hope for the future. It's for the sake of a hope for the future in our own times of disaster that we're reading these books, so let's take a closer look.

If you look at vv 1–3, you'll see that Cyrus, the Persian king who had just conquered the Babylonians and discovered the Jews captive there, tells them they can go home. *The LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make that proclamation*, v 1 says, and the proclamation says that anyone who wants to can go home. That's the beginning of the story of the recovery of the Jewish people from the disaster they had suffered.

But for those who have suffered any sort of defeat, whether it's defeat of the political or military sort such as the Jews had suffered, or a similar defeat but in a more restricted setting, like the division and loss the Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh has suffered in the last year, or the personal defeats we suffer like a marriage in trouble, or massive health problems—no matter what sort of defeat we have suffered, this is hardly the place to begin, a place where God waves a magic wand that suddenly makes everything all right!

What we need to know is how did the Old Testament people of God cope during the seventy years when God was not waving a magic wand, when return home seemed impossible, when many were thinking that God had abandoned them for ever. That's why those other books I noted on the list are important. There is no historical book in the Bible that describes the seventy years in Babylon, but in these we can get some glimpses about how the Old Testament people of God coped with this disaster. One of the best places to go is the book of Psalms, because the Psalms are hymns, prayers and praise, meditations for worship; and to know how they were praying in the midst of disaster can teach us a lot.

Let's look at a couple and see what we can learn from them. Turn first to Psalm 137, either in the pew Bible p 444 or the Prayer Book p 792. I'm going to read it in the Bible version, but the differences aren't substantial. Most of us will have heard it at some time or other; it begins *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion*. Zion is the hill on which Jerusalem was built, at the very top of which was the Temple of the Lord. *There on the 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? This must be very soon after the captives began to arrive in Babylon, and they are being mocked and jeered by the

population—you Jews are famous for the songs and psalms you sang in your rotten old temple, go on, sing us one now! But they can't, of course; the significance of *How can we sing the songs of the LORD in a foreign land?* is not theological, but emotional; they did and still sing the psalms in many foreign lands, but at that moment their hearts would break if they tried, because it would remind them so vividly of their homeland and their worship there. Better to hang up their harps. That's the feeling of the whole community. But suddenly it gets personal; in the next few verses, instead of 'we', it is 'I', the personal reaction perhaps of one of the worship leaders, perhaps even a writer of psalms: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!* His right hand, with which he plays the strings of the harp, his mouth from which he sings, might as well be useless unless they are in the service of Zion.

And there's lesson here: faithfulness in the midst of disaster. Even if he's so blown away by what's happened that he can't sing a hymn, he will set Jerusalem above his highest joy, it will continue to be his priority. Perhaps, even, he went on to write the psalm we said today, Psalm 77, which you can see in the leaflet. Certainly for someone a day came when the harp came down from the tree and voices were again raised in

song. Because whoever wrote that psalm talks about having been in distress, refusing to be comforted, v 1, groaning and fainting spiritually, v 3, too troubled to speak, v 4. But then he remembered his own songs to God, v 6, and begins to ask himself whether it's possible that a God as great as the one he has sung about could possibly leave His people for ever. And God's greatness becomes his lifeline: *To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all Your works and consider all your mighty deeds. Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; You display your power among the peoples.* 'Among the peoples' means 'among the nations'; even in Babylon, they are within reach of God's right hand and His outstretched arm; what God has done, He can undo; the key is to keep our hearts and minds turned to Him in faith. Even when we don't understand what He is doing, or we think He has forgotten us, or abandoned us, we can continue to meditate on His works, because He is the God who performs miracles. He has saved us before and He will save us again; what He asks of us is to *trust* Him. That's what it means to have faith; not just to believe this or that, but to trust Him, even when we are utterly mystified, even dismayed and angry because of what He is doing.

Whatever else God's Old Testament people did during that long exile, they never gave up on Him. They never stopped hoping that they would return to Zion one day, never stopped believing that God had a plan for them.

And then, without warning, God acts in the most amazing way. He over-rules the heart of a king who knew nothing of God's word, someone not part of the people of God, and reveals Himself in this foreign nation, to this foreign king, and says 'tell my people they can go home.' How many times had the people dreamed of that? How many times had they told themselves 'things don't happen that way'? How many times in seventy years! And then one day, it happens. God acts for His faithful people.

We never know how long He will ask us to wait. And as long as we're going to wait, no matter how long it is, well, then no matter how long it is! He's God, He will do what's right when it is right! The only question is, will we still be there when he acts, will we be in a position to take advantage of it? Or will we have given up, turned away from Him?

If you're in the midst of a hard time, well, let's just pray together that God will keep us faithful as we wait for Him to do what is right, when it is right.