

# “Mixed Feelings”

*Learning from God's Word*

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Ezra 1.1-5; 2.68-70; 3.1-3; 3.10-13

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You're back here! It's been so long. Too long. How many days have we been away? How many weeks of worship? When it all began, we assumed it would be short-lived. *“Everything will return to normal soon!”* (Maybe that was for the best. Knowing the truth too soon might have wrecked us.) Then it dragged on, and on, and on. When would it end? When *will* it end? Who knows?

Still, we're here. Back here. Where it feels we belong. Or, does it?

You think I'm talking about getting back in our Sanctuary after . . . yes, it's been 78 weeks. Well, of course I am. But I am just as easily talking about those Jews, returning to Jerusalem, standing around the just-begun restoration of the Holy Temple of God. They'd been gone many thousands of weeks, multiple decades, generations.

For sure, their experience was very different from ours. So was their return. Still, we can learn from them, and from what God was doing through them. God is with us and working through us too.

## II

Those Jews were coming home, after lifetimes of being ripped away.

- First, Assyria swept in, conquered and carted off thousands.
- It came back and took thousands more. Ten of Israel's tribes, gone.
- It invaded again, taking thousands more from the two tribes left.

Then Assyria itself was conquered by Babylon . . . which launched its own invasions.

- It came and forced Jerusalem to submit, and trucked off tens of thousands.
- Then, finally and fatally, Babylon wiped everything out, and deported countless more.

The Story of Israel, God's People . . . the Story of God's Salvation . . . fractured.<sup>1</sup>

They waited. God had promised. Waited. For how long?

As Assyria fell to Babylon, so now Babylon fell to Persia. Expect more of the same.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 710.

Except Persia's king, Cyrus, began letting the Jews go home. All God's promises started coming true.<sup>2</sup> Sort of.

### III

Here we are, among those returnees. In front of us, the foundations of the old, destroyed Temple, already being restored so the new House of God can rise. Can you feel that?

We've returned . . . but only a few. After the exiles began, so many of God's People, 10 tribes worth, got lost. Some destroyed. Many scattered. Others forgot who they were. Also, through these years many who stayed faithful built new homes, made new communities, found new successes in Babylon and across its empire. They have chosen to stay there. So yes, we've returned. Not many. Not yet, at least. Can you feel that?

We're in our own land . . . but it's shrunken, its boundaries tightened. It's not even ours. Just a province in Cyrus's empire. Can you feel that?

We're home . . . but not settled. Around us are hostile neighbours. Among us, people who were here when we got back. We're distantly connected. They, descendant from those allowed to stay, while our ancestors were forced to leave. Separated, for so long, we are strangers, barely speaking. Can you feel that?

We've got our king back. Zerubbabel, grandson of the royal line.<sup>3</sup> But he is no David or Solomon, not even a bad one. He's just a governor serving Cyrus, like the former CEO now managing a branch office. The rest of our royalty stayed back in Babylon for the long haul.<sup>4</sup> Can you feel that?

We're in Jerusalem . . . but Holy Zion is tiny, a few neighbourhoods around crumbled walls. Not a destination for kings, a magnet for riches. The days when the Lord loved it seem far gone.<sup>5</sup> Can you feel that?

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra 1:1 speaks of "the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah." That prophet had spoken of the people's return in Jeremiah 30-33.

<sup>3</sup> His grandfather was Jeconiah, the penultimate king of Judah. Jeconiah was dethroned and exiled during the first Babylonian invasion. His uncle Zedekiah was installed as a puppet ruler, but after he turned on Babylon came the final invasion and total destruction of Jerusalem in 586.

<sup>4</sup> More accurately, Judah's line of David's descendants. Apparently they continued to serve a leadership function among the exile communities, into the 13<sup>th</sup> century after Christ. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exilarch>

<sup>5</sup> See Psalm 87:2.

And this Temple. Will the architects' imaginations raise its walls? Will our hopes cover it with gold? Will our songs ever fill it? Will our prayers find a listening ear? Will our offerings be met with delight? Will it last?

This tiny scrap of God's People, we are back. But to what? Every bit to celebrate comes with a "but. . . ." Can you feel that?

#### IV

It's no wonder that when they throw their "Welcome Home" party, there are mixed feelings. Many are thrilled. But those who remember what it was like before everything happened, weep. Maybe tears of joy. Maybe a release of the trauma they'd held in so tight. Maybe realizing nothing will measure up to everything lost.

You think I'm talking about those Jews who returned to Jerusalem and stood at the New Temple building site. Of course I am.

But I am just as easily talking about us today. Tomorrow too. This will be a long process of returning. We'll be waltzing forward, then stumbling back.

Every step of the way, some of us will rejoice. Some will weep. And in and around those, we'll have all sorts of other feelings.

Some of us can't wait to move forward, and discover what is next. Some of us can't wait to go back, and recover the ways it used to be.

We won't be consistent. Some who weep today will laugh tomorrow. Some who celebrate this week will lament next. Who knows what the following day will bring. For some of us, all this will be mixed up in our one little single self. A cauldron of confusion.

We'll look at each other. *How can you feel that, when I'm feeling this? How can you think that, when my opposite is so obvious?*

It won't help that, even as we return, none of us has been here before.

#### V

You know what's cool? That day in Jerusalem, when the shouts of joy and the sounds of weeping were rising up, no one could tell them apart. Because they all belonged together. Wow.

Can that be us? I think so.

Whatever particular feelings and thoughts you are having, they are good. We treasure them. Because we treasure you. Your feelings and thoughts are gifts to us all.

Whatever strange feelings and unfathomable thoughts someone else is having, so different from yours, are good. Treasures, because you treasure them. A gift for you, for us all.

Please do not take them apart. We all belong, together.

## VI

We're spending 3 weeks with this particular story. Last week, we LISTENED to it, so it started getting into us. Today we're LEARNING what was going on, to help us see what is going on. Next Sunday, please RESPOND.

Maybe it will be good for you to share with us what's going on in you these days. What's your weeping? What's your rejoicing? Write it out for me. Or set up a time when we can chat. That would be good, good enough.

If you want, though, you can share it with all of us. Next week, I could read it. Or we could record you, and play it. Only if you're okay with that. I think it could be a gift. There might be a song you'd like us to hear. Some art you'd like us to see.

Whatever. Tell me. You and all of us will build next week's RESPONSE.

## VII

Last thing. Most important. Notice that during their return, God was all over it. God stirred up King Cyrus to let them go back. God stirred up them to leave. Before, God stirred up leaders to hold them in their exile. God stirred up prophets to make God's promises. Now, God was keeping God's word. God never fails.

God is all over us. God has kept us. God will keep bringing us back. God will delight in our rejoicing, and share in our weeping. And hold us together.

God's Story of God's People . . . it's never broken. God's salvation . . . in Jesus the Messiah, it's guaranteed. He is always restoring, renewing, making things right. And he keeps on going.

Thanks be to God.