



Return from Babylon—Don't Trip Over What's Behind You

April 23, 2023

How do you move forward after going through difficult trials?

Scripture gives us a powerful example of God's people coming back from the brink of destruction even when their desperate circumstances were the result of their own mistakes.

Judah was under the discipline of the Lord and taken into captivity by the Babylonian Empire. After 70 years, it was time for the discipline to end and time for Judah to return to its homeland.

The Babylonian Empire was overtaken by the Persian Empire during Judah's captivity, and when Cyrus became king, he issued an edict in 539 BC allowing the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland and rebuild.

They would still be governed by the Persian Empire and were not allowed to establish their own independent country, but they could begin to recreate the society, culture, and religion distinctive to their people. The younger ones needed to relearn the language, worship, and sacrificial systems. Slowly, they recaptured the glory of their former kingdom and aligned themselves with the heart of the God they betrayed.

How did they move forward after such a difficult trial? **God sovereignly led His people** out of exile.

During the captivity, Ezekiel prophesied to the early exiles, and Daniel had a long ministry in the courts of Babylon and Persia. Both saw dramatic visions that revealed what God was doing during this tumultuous time and what He planned to do in the near and distant future. They were voices of hope in an almost hopeless era.

The prophets saw what God was saying about the near future, but they also sometimes saw through the corridors of history toward the last days, many of which are on the verge of being fulfilled in our lifetime.

At the prophesied time, an edict permitted the Jewish exiles to return home. However, many remained where they were.

Some key figures who played a role in restoring the Jewish nation are these:

- Zerubbabel, a descendant of a former king of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, led the first wave of returnees.
- Ezra, a scribe and expert in the law, came later and led the return to God's Word.
- Nehemiah, a contemporary of Ezra, wept over the deterioration of Jerusalem and returned to both oversee the rebuilding of its walls and to develop the unity of the people.
- Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in very distinct ways during the time of restoration following the exile. At times they encouraged diligence in rebuilding efforts and in keeping the law. At other times, they heard and spoke words from God about His ultimate purpose for His people in the centuries to come.
- Esther became Persia's queen and was able to use her influence to thwart a genocide planned against her people, the Jews.

No matter how distant geographically, culturally, or spiritually God's people are, Scripture portrays Him as carefully watching over them to strengthen and preserve them. When they returned, they knew they deserved the harsh discipline they had received, but they were also filled with hopes of future prosperity and a kingdom that reflected the glory of God.

The people of Israel returned home and committed to:

- Worship God in truth
- Rededicate themselves to learning His Word
- Cling together as a community of faith
- Influence the world for the glory of the one true God

In the days of the united kingdom, He drew people from around the world to see His glory. But with His people scattered around the world, the stage is set for a much broader display of His glory around the earth. For example, had Daniel not been in Babylon, there would have been no Magi coming to worship Jesus shortly after He was born in Bethlehem.

When God leads His people through trials, He is actually putting them in a better position to accomplish His purposes. **His redemption is always more than a consolation prize**; it's a setup for an even greater opportunity.

Joseph went through terrible suffering, was sold into slavery by his brothers, and was falsely accused and imprisoned. Finally, after 12 years, he was put in a role of great authority where he could save the lives of his family and many others. And Joseph recognizes God's sovereignty:

Genesis 50:20 — “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

Many of the lessons we need to know about life are in what we teach our kids. In the children's book *We're Going On A Bear Hunt*, the characters set out on an adventure through long grass, a deep river, mud, a dark forest, and a deep cave. Every time they face a challenge, they chant: *We can't go over it / We can't go under it / Oh NO! / We've got to go through it...*

We all go through trials. We must go through things that we'd rather go around.

James 1:2-4 — “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

If we're ready for the tests and trials, though they will be tough, it will help to be prepared.

We must live ready for testing times because they are coming. The tests are of many varieties. We get through them by “considering”, or “counting” it pure joy.

It may not feel like it is joyful. It doesn't feel good to be in the midst of a trial. But by faith, we are called to consider it joy because of what is going to come out of it. The tests we undergo are designed to produce endurance.

Endurance means “to stay under” — not cracking; not running away. The trial is producing spiritual strength and tenacious faith.

Muscles grow under the weight of exercise. Astronauts' muscles don't grow in space because there's no gravity or resistance. But James says that the testing or pressure we are under produces perseverance and if we let it do its work, it leads to maturity. But we need God's wisdom in the midst of a trial to see things rightly.

James 1:5 — “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

We can think we know what's happening from our perspective and blame God—or we can ask Him for wisdom. God is always doing way more than we think in the time of our trials.

We need His wisdom to see things rightly as we come through our time of discipline or time of trial.

Don't trip over what is behind you. God is working things in your life to prepare you for what is to come. God is positioning you to better glorify Him. Trust Him for that. As we respond rightly, He is also going to reward us in the Kingdom to come.

James 1:12 — “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

God's goal is not to crush you, but to crown you.

The tests and trials of this short life make us more mature and more effective while here on earth and prepare us to receive the crown in the Kingdom to come.