

the call to leave Babylon

finding meaning at the end of the world

KEY TEXTS—ZECHARIAH 2:6-7; REVELATION 18:1-5

SEARCHING FOR MEANING

In their book, *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman wrote, we "desperately need meaning in our lives and will sacrifice a great deal to institutions that will provide meaning for us." So the question to consider is this: do you have meaning in your life, and where do you get it from?

A few years ago, I watched a TED talk by Simon Sinek who wrote a book called, *Start with Why*. His thesis is simple: people will be loyal—and will part with their money—to organisations that provide them with the answer to "why?"

In his presentation, Sinek drew 3 concentric circles. He wrote "why" in the middle circle, "how" in the second circle, and "what" in the outer circle. He suggested that most organisations address "what" and "how" but rarely "why". But answering why is what creates loyalty and meaning. So what is the "why?" that can give us meaning and satisfaction with what we do? To begin to answer this, I want to direct you towards the end of the world.

meaning at the end of the world

Steve Jobs famously repeated ice hockey's Wayne Gretzky's memorable quote: I skate towards where the puck is going, not to where it's been. Prophetically, time is moving towards the last message given to the world is Revelation 18:1-5.

So if we are on a path to such a world-wide announcement, it would make sense for us to understand how to prepare for such a moment. Indeed, I would suggest that the greatest meaning you can have in your life today is linked to being part of God's purposes to prepare the world for the return of Jesus. But how? And what does this have to do with calling people to leave Babylon?

PIECING THE STORY TOGETHER

This call to "come out" of Babylon in Revelation 18:4 alludes to a number of Old Testament passages (see Jeremiah 50:8; 51:6; Isaiah 48:20; 52:11). **Isaiah** declares this message looking forward to a future Babylonian exile. **Jeremiah** speaks while God's people are still in captivity. **Zechariah's** call around 520BC comes once a remnant has already returned from exile to Jerusalem. It is the timing of Zechariah's call that may be helpful for us to understand how to prepare the way for Jesus by preparing to give this great call in Revelation 18:4.

background—God's purpose for Cyrus

Long before the remnant returned and Zechariah stands up to speak is one of the most amazing prophecies in the Bible. Over 100 years before Cyrus king of Persia is born, God names

Cyrus as the one who will return His people back to Jerusalem—for the specific purpose of rebuilding the temple (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-6, 13).

So when the Jewish leaders see that the time for the exile is coming to an end, they go to Cyrus and show him this prophecy. As a result, Cyrus believes God has chosen him, so he issues a decree for any willing persons to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4). You can see this edict reflected in the Cyrus Cylinder at the British Museum.

Haggai & Zechariah—getting back on track

Due to Cyrus' command, Zerubbabel led a remnant back to Jerusalem, but after just a year of opposition by the surrounding people, the remnant became discouraged with the rebuilding programme and resigned themselves to staying at home. After fifteen years of inaction, God spoke through Haggai, part of the remnant himself, to the timid materialists in Jerusalem, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (Haggai 1:4)

About two months later, Zechariah, also part of this remnant, addressed those in Jerusalem, but then facing their relatives still living in Babylon, cried for them to flee (Zechariah 2:6-7).

But why does Zechariah call to the remnant's relatives to leave Babylon? It is clear that God is going to bring judgement on Babylon and the lingering Jews would not want to be caught up in that destruction. However, the wider context of the story is the call to those in Babylon to join their relatives in Jerusalem. **The call to join the remnant was a call to help in the specific purpose that God had chosen Cyrus—to restore the temple (Ezra 1:3). The restoration of God's sanctuary was the primary, driving, motivation for the remnant originally leaving Babylon.**

the call to come "out" is a call to come "in"

In other words, **Zechariah's call to 'come out' of Babylon was actually a call to 'come in'—into a community that was defined as a remnant because of their devotion to the cause of restoring the place of God's personal presence on the earth.** This call was urgent due to imminent judgment on Babylon, but perhaps more importantly as Haggai indicated, the call was urgent because of the need for the remnant to recapture their temple rebuilding mission that had been let drift for so many years.

So contextually, the focus was not simply about "coming out", nor "coming in", but on entering into a process of re-building the place of God's presence that His glory may be increasingly revealed.

REBUILDING HUMAN TEMPLES

we are God's temple—I am God's temple

When we look through the Bible, the New Testament picks up the imagery of temples and applies this to individuals and churches. Paul writes that we are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20)? We are the places through which the glory of God is put on display in the world. Indeed Paul uses the call out of Babylon to call the Corinthians to purity—"for we are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1). So when human temples become broken down, what actually becomes broken and must be fixed?

focus on the image of God

- **Creation—humans created in God's image**—"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27)
- **Fall—God's image in Christ obscured**—"the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4)
- **Re-formation—the Trinity** "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Roman 8:29).
- **Re-formation—God's ministers** "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).
- **Re-formation—Myself** "we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

APPLICATION

I am suggesting that the call to come out of Babylon in Revelation 18:4 infers a foundational call in—to swell the ranks of the remnant, so that they can re-claim their divinely appointed mission to restore the image of God in broken human beings—that God's glory is increasingly revealed

through them across the earth. Specifically, I am suggesting that participating in this mission provides you with the greatest purpose for living. In this context, consider 4 challenges:

1. **A theological challenge** The challenge before me is entering into the Father's purpose that I may be "conformed to the image of his Son"—but what does this mean? If I was designed in the image of God—and that image therefore defines what it means to be human—how do I define that image, that it may be used as a blueprint for restoration? How can I restore something I might not even be able to define?
2. **A devotional challenge** Paul writes that the image of God is revealed in "ever-increasing glory" as I "contemplate the Lord's glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18) How compelling and desirable is the beauty of the Lord for me, that I prioritise time for this above all other things?
3. **A leadership challenge** We can easily see baptism as the goal of the church, rather than growing into the image of God "with ever-increasing glory". Scot McKnight suggests this is because modern evangelicalism has largely embraced a culture focused on attaining personal salvation rather than a culture of on-going discipleship, partly due to an historical over-emphasis on justification. So if the prophetic purpose is to restore broken people in the image of God, how can we ensure this prophetic vision to establish transformational communities is prioritised?
4. **A missiological challenge** How much do I care, or are willing to be in "the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in [others]" (Galatians 4:19)

Ellen White pulls together these themes of temple, brokenness and restoration,

From eternal ages it was God's purpose that every created being, from the bright and holy seraph to man, should be a temple for the indwelling of the Creator. Because of sin, humanity ceased to be a temple for God. Darkened and defiled by evil, the heart of man no longer revealed the glory of the divine One. But by the incarnation of the Son of God, the purpose of heaven is fulfilled. God dwells in humanity, and through saving grace the heart of man becomes again his temple. (Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, December 31, 1908.)

1

LIFE POINT

finding meaning rests on answering the question "why?"

2

LIFE POINT

the call to "come out" is actually a call to "come in"

3

LIFE POINT

the mission of the remnant was to rebuild the broken temple

4

LIFE POINT

the call to leave Babylon is a call to transformation