

Introduction

1. Assignment in SCZ Bolivia

- a. 35 years (1979) ago Debbie & I stepped out of a Boeing 727 into the intl airport in SCZ Bolivia, located in the heart of South America. The Bolivian airlines carried us from Miami FL over the Gulf of Mexico, across the Amazon River and over the rainforests of Brazil, a trip of almost 4200 air nautical miles.
- b. We were met at the airport by Frieda Schellenberg, a long term MCC worker, a nurse who traveled tirelessly to rural villages, establishing health clinics, training local people to provide basic medical care and then on the weekends would offer biblical studies, leadership formation. She received us with open heart and hands and became our adopted mother helping us adjust to our new home.
- c. At age 25 we just celebrated our first anniversary and I had recently graduated from my 3 years of study at AMBS seminary. We celebrated our first anniversary, praying, packing and planning for our first assignment in overseas missions.
- d. Through a process of testing and responding to a call to serve the church, the door to Latin America began to open for us.
- e. The irony for me was the only time I didn't pass a test was in my high school Spanish class and now Debbie and I were off to serve in a Spanish speaking country.
- f. Debbie had completed her studies at Malone College in OH as a Spanish teacher, pretty amazing for a young woman who had grown up in a rural farming community in central Iowa where they didn't see many outsiders.

2. What we had:

What we had

- One way ticket to Santa Cruz Bolivia
 - Desire to serve, learn & grow in our faith
 - Small group of young Christians ready to explore God's leading
 - Foundation established by MCC Volunteers and several missionaries
 - Praying partners in US and Canada who interceded, wrote and prayed faithfully
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3. What we did not have:

What we did not have

1. Permanent residence
2. Earthly possessions
3. Extended family
4. Language skills
5. Ice cream
6. Children
7. Sweet corn
8. Worship in our own language

- a. Permanent residence. We moved to a new land and had to find housing in the local city.
- b. Earthly possessions everything in 2 suitcases. It was amazing to open ourselves up to being a guest in a new land and culture, the only thing we took with us were a few clothes and some personal items. That forced us to draw on the resources at hand or learn to live without certain possessions
- c. Extended family. We were now 1000s of miles away from our families of origin and sisters, brothers, parents, grandparents. We had to be adopted by a new family.
- d. Language skills. For several months we immersed ourselves into learning Spanish through tutors, coworkers and just getting out and practicing.

- e. Ice cream. In the area we lived heat and humidity were in abundance, refrigerators were just starting to become available.
- f. Children. We had no family when we first arrived which was hard for people to understand. When our first child was born there, all of a sudden we became more believable, more authentic.
- g. Sweet corn.
- h. Worship in our own language. Learning to worship God in a new language became a challenge and priority for us.
- i. Awareness of the Bolivian culture.

Things we did not have

- Awareness of the Bolivian culture
- Ability to identify with poverty
- Over filled schedules
- Cool weather

We knew very little about how the culture was shaped, created and maintained. This helped us become aware of how we needed to adapt to the local settings to become effective listeners. This allowed us to ask questions, seek understanding, and listen to the experiences of others,

identifying what was good and not so good about their world.

- j. Ability to identify with poverty. We left from a position of economic strength. We arrived to a setting of one of the economically poorest countries. The amazing work done by a number of people including Wendell and Karen Amstutz sought to address the subsistence. Wendell and Karen went as MCC volunteers then after time decided to buy a small farm where they discovered that the area was great for growing citrus fruits. Wendell cultivated a variety of lime tree shoots that were strong, disease resistant then he would bring in high quality shoots from the best orchards in FL & CA and would then graft them into the strong rooted lime. Over the next 4-5 years this small tree would grow to the point where it could now be transplanted. Wendell soon became known as the Johnny Citrus seed of eastern Bolivia where he planted 1,000s of lemons, oranges, grapefruits. This provided not only sustenance for the family but would provide an abundance to be able to share with neighbors or take to the market for additional income.
- k. Over filled schedules.
- l. Cool weather

4. Things we would lose

Things we would lose

1. Ability to communicate in only one language
2. Ability to control circumstances
3. Proximity to our families and all the events taking place in their lives
4. Smooth roads, air conditioning
5. Only seeing the world through the eyes of the Superpower

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5. Things we would acquire

Things we would acquire

1. Ability to speak Spanish language
2. Many new Bolivian friends and neighbors
3. New cultural insights about our host culture and our own culture
4. New even more extended global family
5. New foods quinoa, fresh mangos, papayas, empanadas, cunape
6. Slower pace of life

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6. Insights we would gain

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- Deeper awareness of our utter dependence upon God
- How we are viewed as North Americans through the eyes of other peoples
- Ability to find meaning in relationships and not in possessions
- Importance of worship in our lives as followers of Jesus

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7. Signs of God at work:

Signs of God at Work

1. Young Bolivian women and men who began to boldly follow Jesus
 2. Formation of a growing body of Christians who met for worship, prayer, retreats and outreach
 3. Hunger for alternatives to the popular culture
 4. Dedication to serve and minister to those in need around them
- a. Young Bolivian women and men who began to boldly follow Jesus
 - b. Formation of a growing body of Christians who met for worship, prayer, retreats and outreach
 - c. Hunger for alternatives to the popular culture
 - d. Dedication to serve and minister to those in need around them
 - e. 7 years later when a set of circumstances ended our ministry, we left from a modern brand new international airport, surrounded by a large group of Bolivians who we had come to know and love like a new family. The spiritual seeds we planted were now ready to grow and the bright eyed energetic youth stepped into new roles and responsibilities.

- f. God's Spirit had gone before us to open the doors, God's Spirit accompanied us in the midst of many challenges and God's Spirit remained with this growing group of believers. God's Spirit even helped carry back home, weary, worn, saddened by the separation, uncertain of the future, now with 2 young children.

Background to today's message

1. 2 weeks ago Neil helped us understand the context in which our spiritual ancestors were carried off to Babylonian Exile
 - a. We became familiar with the story of how God's warnings went unheeded which resulted in the separation of the people from their homeland, their worship center and their king.
 - b. The people of the northern kingdom of Israel were swept off by the conquering Assyrian forces in 722 BC.
 - c. Judah avoided the same fate due to the fact they agreed to pay a tribute tax to the Assyrians that eventually leveraged them financially.
2. Last week James Krabill helped us see the transformation with his two insightful diagrams that illustrated the heart of what God was trying to accomplish.
 - a. When we see God at work in the story of Abraham, God calls him to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees which interestingly enough is the location of the nation of Babylon that would eventually arise 700—800 years later to capture the people of Israel and subject them to a time of slavery and exile in a foreign land.
 - b. God called Abraham and Sarah for the purpose of creating a people that would eventually bless the whole earth by their obedience to following the path God outlined.
 - c. Through the process of becoming a great nation while living in Egypt where they eventually became slaves, the

mighty deliverance from slavery in the Exodus, introduced them to a God who travels with them providing protection from the heat of the desert, food and water, leadership.

- d. Eventually they settle into their own land and start to become like all the nations around them. Eventually they cry out for an earthly king. God warned them of the dangers of becoming like the other nations but that did not stop them from pursuing their agenda.
- e. They began the process of interpreting their place as the center to which all people would come to find God.

3. Economic Boom in Israel & Building of the Temple

Solomon Builds the Temple

Economic boom in Israel

- Solomon ruled from 961-922
- 959-952 Construction lasted for 7 years
- Temple served as royal chapel
- Holy of Holies held the Ark of the Covenant
- Jerusalem became the center worship

922 Judah and Israel Split into 2 Nations

- 922 to 722 Israel exists as separate nation
- 722 Israel falls into Assyrian Captivity never to rise again
- 922 to 597 Judah exists as separate nation
- 597 Judah conquered by Babylon & king Nebuchadnezzar
- 597 to 520 Exile in Babylon

- a. Solomon ruled from 961-922
- b. 959-952 Temple Construction lasted for 7 years
- c. Served as royal chapel
- d. Holy of Holies held the Ark of the Covenant

- e. Created worship center in the southern part of the nation of Israel
- f. 922 to 722 Israel exists as separate nation
- g. 722 Israel falls into Assyrian Captivity never to rise again
- h. 911-609 World Superpower Assyria dominated the known world
- i. 922 to 597 Judah exists as separate nation
- j. 609 Nebuchadnezzar, Babylonian king conquers Assyrian Empire and sweeps control of Jerusalem
- k. 597 1st deportation of Jews to Babylon
- l. 587 Judah conquered by Babylon & king Nebuchadnezzar, Temple is completely leveled and destroyed
- m. 587 to 538 Exile in Babylon
- n. Prophet Jeremiah travels to Babylon to comfort the people and helps them settle in a new land, new language new customs.
- o. Trip was over 900 miles on foot taking 4 months of arduous travel across the deserts.
- p. 568 Nebuchadnezzar marches on to conquer Egypt but remains in power only for a few more years.



World Superpowers

Babylon 626 – 537 B.C.

- King Nebuchadnezzar supreme power
- Conquers Assyria in 612 with the Fall of Nineveh
- Conquers Jerusalem in 597
- 587 Destroys temple
- Carries Jewish people to captivity
- Conquers Egypt in 568

Persian Empire 600 – 336 B.C.

- 550 – 530 King Cyrus
- 538 Edict of Cyrus calling Jews to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding temple
- 486 – 465 Xerxes rules Persia
- 465 – 424 Artaxerxes rules
- 458 Ezra arrives in Jerusalem
- 445 Nehemiah leads team to restore broken walls around the Temple

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4. Meanwhile further in the east the rising Persian Empire begins to sweep across the continent and in a short time becomes the next world superpower that swallows up Babylon
- a. 539 Cyrus leader of the Persian Empire (now modern day Iran) conquers Babylon and becomes the leader of the most dominant World Superpower until the time of Alexander the Great in 332 who would eventually conquer most of the known world from Greece to Egypt to India.
 - b. Unlike the ruthless kings of Assyria and Babylon, King Cyrus shows a different side of leadership.
 - c. He recognizes the sovereignty of the nations he conquered and encouraged them to return to their homelands and build up their own cities and follow their own traditions
 - d. Cyrus issues Edict in 538 found in Ezra 1:1-4.

- e. Under this Edict, the exiles in Babylon begin to return in 4 stages
5. 520 Rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem
 6. Our story today of the exiles starting to return to the Promised Land from their captivity in Babylon is a story that is a result of the historic turn of events.
 - a. After 70 years of being uprooted from their homeland, exposed to new languages, cultures, customs, wrestling with questions of what all these new adjustments mean and how they hold on to their own traditions and understandings grew to be even more challenging.
 - b. Anyone who enters a mission field across town or to another continent also begins to wrestle with the questions posed by new realities. How does this new situation affect our ideas of God? How is God going to work in this new situation
 - c.
 7. Our text today Ezra & Nehemiah actually take place almost 140 years after the initial destruction of Jerusalem in 587.
 - a. The Jewish people settled into their new lands and established themselves, keeping their language, cultures, customs and observance of the law.
 - b. Ezra was a direct descendant from the lineage of Aaron, Moses's right hand man.
 - c. He was a scribe, and scholar of the law or specialist in the interpretation of the Torah, 1st 5 books of the OT which would have been their only source.
 - d. Ezra arrived in 458 and found the temple restored but no walls around the city.
 - e. ILLUSTRATION: Great-Great-Great Grandfather Abraham Sprunger born in April 1822 in Corgemont Berg Jura district. 1852 moved to Wayne County OH to begin a new life in the US. Back then the only way to cross the ocean

was by sailing ship and could take 4-6 weeks depending upon the winds

- f. All I know about Switz I would call the Kaleidoscope view
- g. Images show beautiful Swiss village surrounded by mountains, post card scenery.
- h. 160 years later, I only know about my ancestors from genealogies and family stories.
- i. Ezra and Nehemiah were far removed from the reality of their ancestral roots. Having been born and raised in a different culture, language and traditions
- j. In some of the last recorded events in the OT story, God stirs the hearts of world leaders, scribes and people in positions of power and influence to look back on their historic homeland and respond to reports that not all is well.

8. Positive aspects of God at work.

Positive Aspects

Ezra	Nehemiah
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct descendant of Aaron • Scribe, scholar of the Law or Torah • Commissioned by King of Persia Artaxerxes to restore worship in Jerusalem • Calls people to repentance and restores God’s covenant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head cupbearer to Persian King Artaxerxes • Seeks permission to help rebuild walls of Jerusalem • Great organizer with leadership skills • Appointed governor for 12 years • Restores the Sabbath, reinstates the tithe • Works closely with Ezra

10. Ezra

- a. Direct descendant of Aaron
- b. Scribe, scholar of the Law or Torah
- c. Commissioned by King of Persia Artaxerxes to restore worship in Jerusalem
- d. Calls people to repentance and restores God’s covenant
- e. Field scope view looking from a long way off
- f. Timing to return and restore the struggling community
- g. Ezra arrives first to re-establish worship in the temple
- h. Ezra travels long distance from Babylon with his training as a scribe, a scholar,
- i. Wrestles with the questions of what it means to be the people of God now that they have been forced to stretch their world view in captivity.
- j. The land is partially restored, the temple is being rebuilt but no earthly king has been restored.

11. Nehemiah

- a. Head cupbearer to Persian King Artaxerxes
- b. Seeks permission to help rebuild walls of Jerusalem
- c. Great organizer with leadership skills
- d. Appointed governor for 12 years
- e. Restores the Sabbath, reinstates the tithe
- f. Works closely with Ezra
- g. 444 BC Nehemiah is cupbearer to the King of Persia, Artaxerxes living in the city of Susa
- h. He receives word from some of his relatives of the difficulties facing his Jewish families that had returned to their homeland but were still without the walls of protection around them.
- i. He appeals to the King who grants special assignment to go and serve as governor for 12 years along with providing resources to actually continue the building projects.

- j. Nehemiah's confession 1: 3-12 we read how God stirred his heart to make a long journey with the goal of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, to make the city a safe place to dwell once again.
- k. Makes the 4 month journey with resources in hand
- l. Arrives and in darkness inspects the needs of the community.
- m. Sets about to rebuild the walls around the temple.
- n. Restores the Sabbath and stops the Temple from being used as a place of business
- o. Reinstates the tithe and first fruit offerings to help people understand importance of keeping worship at the center of their lives.

12. Negative aspects

Negative Aspects

- Implemented reforms but did not fully comprehend purpose of Exile
- Refused to accept help from neighbors in Samaria
- Narrowed definition of who could be part of the community
- Focused inward not outward
- Treated foreigners as not worthy of God's grace
- Strict adherence to the law more important than relationships
- Drove deeper separation from Samaria
- Not ready to be "light to all people"

- a. Implemented reforms but did not fully comprehend purpose of Exile
- b. Refused to accept help from neighbors in Samaria
- c. Narrowed definition of who could be part of the community
- d. Focused inward not outward
- e. No longer looking through the Kaleidoscope or the field scope they begin to use what I describe as the microscope approach.
- f. As perfect as their attempts were at rebuilding, they did not fully comprehend the purpose of the exile, why they were sent away, their understanding of what God had in mind clear back in Genesis, Blessed to be a blessing.
- g. One of the saddest parts of the story is the attempts by the former nation of Israel, now populated with people from other lands who still had a belief in the worship of God. Through their own exile they had learned to seek God outside of the land and temple.
- h. Nehemiah refused to give them any part in the rebuilding process.
- i. He treated them as foreigners and aliens not worthy of experiencing the ongoing grace of God at Work.
- j. In the story of Jonah we see parallels of how God called Jonah to travel to the heart of the Assyrian superpower, to the capital of Nineveh, to proclaim
- k. Drove the separation of the Jews even deeper from the Samaritans which carried for the next 400 years until Jesus makes the choice when traveling from the north to Jerusalem goes right through the heart of Samaria and proclaims the good news to the woman at the well in Samaria, announcing that God's true worshippers will no longer be in Jerusalem temple.

13. _____

- l. Jesus uses a Samaritan in the parable of responding to the question who is my neighbor.
- m. Nehemiah took out the microscope to check the DNA of those who were allowed to be part of this new community. The blood lines had to be pure and in effect set the clock backward for the movement out of Jerusalem.
- n. It would take another 400 years until the coming of Jesus to reverse the inward spiral of race and boundary as defining forces of faithfulness.
- o. Adherence to the strict interpretation of the law was more important than all other relationships.

I hear 3 invitations from the stories of Ezra & Nehemiah

3 Invitations from Ezra & Nehemiah

1. Acknowledge God's leading in everything you do
2. Be ready to follow God's calling
3. Cultivate life of confession, prayer and worship

A. Acknowledge God's leading you in everything you do

- a. Be attentive for God's leading in every situation in your life
- b. Ezra followed God's leading to leave the comforts of his new home in Babylon to return to the homeland to teach people the way of the law.
- c. Nehemiah heard God's voice in the far away land at the heart of the dominant empire
- d. God is always ready to speak to you, to us

B. Be ready to follow God's calling

- a. For Ezra & Nehemiah, they both had different skills, Ezra as a priest, scribe, and interpreter of the law.
- b. Nehemiah had the gift of vision and leadership
- c. I began this morning noting how God called Debbie and me to serve in a new land and a new culture.
- d. We would not be the persons we are today had we not obeyed God and committed a part of our lives to the extension of the Gospel.
- e. In a very short time we as a congregation will be continuing to respond to God's leading as we prepare to send Jane & Jerrell, Naomi, Teresa, Sierra and Jordan to Ecuador.
- f. Through a process of listening, discerning and hearing God's call we have an opportunity to send, support and walk with them as they carry the Good News to people who are ready to grow in their faith.
- g. We do not know all the outcomes that are in store for them or for us, how they will be transformed, how we will be transformed.
- h. We only know that God has opened the door and provided the resources.

- i. What an amazing sign of God at work we are able to see. The Spirit of God is going before us, is abiding with us and will show us the way.
 - j. We continue to respond as Abraham and Sarah, As Ezra & Nehemiah.
- C. Cultivate a life of worship, prayer and confession at the center of your life
- a. Both had a heart to serve God and to help restore a broken and struggling community.
 - b. Both wrestled with tough questions of what it means to be faithful to God.
 - c. As perfect as they were in faithfully responding to God's leading and calling, they did not have the full picture.
 - d. We must remember to not be too quick to turn to the microscope, to too narrowly define how God wants to work in our world and in our lives.
 - e. While some of the reforms were necessary, they kept the spiral going in the wrong direction.
 - f. There would not be a church today if there reforms had ended all the changes that were yet to take place.
 - g. There was still a need for God to break through the confining restrictions they had put into place.

Steven Fath
11-30-14
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