

RESTORATION

Ezra 5:1-17

I would like to read just the first five verses of Ezra, Chapter 5.

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shetharbozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" They also asked them this: "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

I had planned today to kick off the New Year by jumping into our study on the gospel of John and to delve into the heart of that New Testament book. But then God just really dropped this message right in my lap as I was praying and reading, and I believe it is a message for us for the new year. It is a message on restoration.

Over the Christmas holidays my family and I, for the most part, were in Dallas. I say "for the most part" because there was one family member who wasn't with us - my newly married daughter. But we were there, and I was at my mother-in-law's house, and she prepared coffee for me. I noticed as I was drinking the coffee that on the mug it said, "Gourmet Lutheran Coffee." And as you might expect in a Lutheran mug, the coffee didn't stay very hot. So I told my mother-in-law, I need a Pentecostal mug. This coffee is just not staying hot. If you are Lutheran, we love you, and this is not anything other than just having a little fun with my mother-in-law.

All of that is to say that my hope today is to stir up a little heat for the new year. But more than just a spark or a little bit of enthusiasm, I want to look at restoration, because in many ways the entire bible is about God's restorative work. God creates, man falls -- that's the first three chapters of the bible and the plot is set for the entire scriptures. God is restoring all that is his, and there is

an opportunity for us in the new year to look at this subject and to think about our own lives. It would be helpful for each of us to ask, “Is there something in your life in need of restoration -- your health, your marriage, your family, your career, your soul?” Of course, it goes far beyond what we might perceive individually as our own needs. We want to look beyond just ourselves. We live in a world that needs restoration. It is a fitting, appropriate theme for us as we celebrate the new year.

So I am going to give you three habits necessary for living in God’s restoration. That may sound formulaic, and I think we know that we can’t reduce life to just a pithy, simple, little formula. But it’s probably a little less of a formula than it at first appears to be. We are talking here not about three easy steps: one, two, three. We are talking about habits. We are talking about practices. Notice that we phrase this as “living in God’s restoration.” In other words, restoration is not just a destination: you reach it and it’s done. There is a sense in which we experience restoration. There are these moments of success where we could drive in a stake and say, “Something has been restored,” but the restorative work of God is an ongoing process. It will not be complete until this life is done, until this world is done and Jesus makes all things new. God wants us to be giving ourselves to the work of restoration in our own lives and in the lives of people around us.

When we traveled on Christmas Day, we went to the airport, and the five boys and my wife and I got in the security line. We were waiting in line and then something really strange happened. They were doing these random checks where they take a cloth and they test your hands. (This is even before I even get to show my identification). They randomly tested me and I tested positive for explosives. Because I’m just dynamite. So, this lady says, “Come with me.” She marches me up to the front. They take my ID. We go through the security check. They take everything out of my bags. And then the moment you fear the worst: “Sir, go into that back room.” They take me back in the back room. There are two men. And I get the thorough pat-down. Then they take the gloves, and they go out, and they test those for explosives.

While this is happening, my family is standing in line and they are seeing me kind of being dragged through security. And Caleb is there. Most of you know Caleb. Caleb is adopted from Africa. He does not look like me, though he is good-looking, like me. He is in the sound booth today. It just so happens that there was a lady standing next to him who happened to be black as well. She says to Caleb, “What is happening? What is going on with that man up there?” And Caleb says, “I don’t know.” She says to Caleb, “That’s it. That’s it. He’s a man. He’s white. He gets to go to the front

of the line.” Caleb first of all just busts out laughing then says, “No, that’s not what happened.” She says, “No, no. That’s the way they do it. That’s the way it happens.”

Now, somehow I have to connect that to this message, but there is an explanation. There is a point to the illustration. I think this woman observed something. Then, based on her history, based on her life experience, she came up with an explanation. You can be offended by that, or you can not be offended, or you can just laugh at it, because we really don’t know what was going on in her mind. But the explanation that she postulated was really way off. It depicts two things. The first, though we laugh at it and appropriately it does point to the difficulty of restoration: We live in a broken world. We live where relationships are just messed up. It’s not like they are just messed up when we are standing in line, and we are black, and a white man goes to the front of the line. It’s not just messed up in that way -- in what we think, and all the things that go on, and all the history that goes back. We know that it’s even more messed up right under the roof where we live, just getting along with the people we love the most. It illustrates that these things are not easily fixed. There are no quick fixes. Restoration is difficult.

The second thing – and this is really the point – it depicts just how far we miss it sometimes. We miss it by miles. We offer explanations, but we really deny the one reality that explains it all. In this case, here is that reality: We have a problem in our relationship with God. That is the explanation for why the world is messed up and why often our lives look messed up.

Here in the book of Ezra, we find God doing a work of restoration in his people. It’s a powerful work of restoration. They had been in captivity for 70 years. According to the prophecy of Jeremiah, the people of God came under the judgment of God, and they -- because of their pronounced, prolonged sin and refusal to get right with God -- they were carried into captivity. Now they have returned to their homeland and they are trying to rebuild.

We will observe here three habits, three practices. You need these to experience and to live in God’s restoration. Let me give the three to you and then we will jump in one point at a time.

1. Persevere by beginning again.
2. Give prominence to the word of God.
3. Believe God for the impossible and the improbable.

1. Persevere by beginning again. The results of sin are not easily fixed. We have said that. Just imagine here how difficult it would have been just to get started in the work of restoration. Seventy years in captivity. A number of you -- your families immigrated to the United States from somewhere else: from the Islands, from Europe, from Latin America, from wherever that may be. Imagine second and third generations in families that have been here in the States. You are going to take everything you have and everyone you know in your family and you are going to go back to your homeland where you came from. This is a dramatic undertaking.

To really put it into context, to get the timeframe right, think about World War II - Germany and Japan. Think about those who emigrated from those countries. They come here. Now you are second or third generation German or Japanese, and you are going to take everyone and go back to where your family was from. Just to get started is difficult.

So, the children of Israel come back, and there is a group that begins to rebuild. The first thing that they do is build an altar and they begin the temple. They lay the foundation of the temple. As they are doing that work in the previous chapter (Chapter 4) they begin to face tremendous opposition. Their enemies come against them. They do these horrible things.

First of all, they try to infiltrate and become a part of them so that they can discredit and stop the work. When that doesn't work, they then pay off officials. They bribe officials and they intimidate. They try to discourage. They try to create all kinds of fear to get them to stop the work. Finally, they write a letter back to the king of Persia, the ruling power, and they tell him, "These people are awful. They are rebellious and they are causing trouble. If they are successful in rebuilding the city, they will never pay tribute and they will cause you all kinds of problems." So the king issues a decree and stops the work.

Listen to this: Nothing happens for the next 15 years. Fifteen years of idleness. You have a destitute people. Poor. No resources. They have come back to this land after being gone for a long time, and now the work stops for 15 years. It is not easy to rebuild what is broken.

I think that this is an important point for you and me to see if you are tempted to be discouraged this morning, because you are not instantly putting your life together. The effects of sin are profound. We were made to live in communion with God, and that

communion, that dear relationship was severed because of our sin. Though there is still much about us that is wonderful as made in the image of God, there is a marring that has taken place, and the work of redemption is difficult. So we must persevere in that work, and we persevere by beginning again. I know that may seem strange, but the process often looks like: I start, I stumble, I fall, I get up, I start, I stumble, I fall, I get up. We begin again. That is exactly what happens in Ezra, Chapter 5. The people are stirred up to begin again.

This is a great message for New Year's, isn't it? Yes, Brian. This is amazing! It's a natural opportunity. You have a fresh start! Now, you are thinking, "Wait, wait, wait -- it's January 3. It's too late. The first has come." Really? Or maybe you've started, and you've already failed? My message is this: Begin again. Are you going to waste 349 days and hope that you hit it just right next year on January 1? We have an opportunity, and I believe that there is a sense in which this is a biblical message. God invites us to not give up by starting again.

Let me give you just a couple of pointers on how to do that. You could be applying this to any number of areas.

- A. Pray for help, specifically in the area where you are beginning again. Pray for God's grace. Exercise more than just willpower. Seek the help of the Lord.
- B. Secondly, begin again and again until you persevere, because this is how you persevere. Be in the mindset that beginning again is not a sign of failure, but it's a sign of perseverance.
- C. This I found very helpful personally: Every time you begin again, don't start over. Start where you left off last time. So, if you are trying to read your bible through, and you started in Genesis and you get to Deuteronomy, then you stop, and then you fail, when you start again, don't go back to Genesis. Go to Deuteronomy where you left off last time. It may take you 40 years, but you will finish the bible.

There is something to be said for just humbly saying, "Okay, where was I? Let me take it up. Let me begin again." Alright, that's the first point.

- 2.** Give prominence to the word of God. How does God stir his people to begin again? Well, he raises up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. We read about them in the first part of Ezra, Chapter 5, and they begin to prophesy. Now, their books are in the Old Testament. If

you go to the end of the Old Testament, they are right there. Haggai is two chapters. Zechariah is the prophet quoted the most in the New Testament. They speak the word of God to the people.

This is a little bit strange to us. We don't imagine this, but they didn't have the ESV study bible that they took out and said, "Okay, let us get into the word of God." No, the prophets of God came and proclaimed God's message to them and stirred them to life. This is interesting because Ezra wasn't there at the time. Ezra comes some 50 years later. He is telling you of the events which lead to him getting there.

Eventually -- this is a spoiler alert -- eventually the people successfully build the temple. They are successful in beginning again as the prophets of God speak to them. Zerubabel, the governor, Joshua, the high priest - they lead the people. The work begins again and they complete it within only a few years. Then some 50 years later, Ezra - he is still back with the King of Persia - he is sent as a minister of God to go and minister God's word.

Remember our point here. Our second point is: Give prominence to the word of God. The work began when two prophets were raised up. But 50 years later, when it needed a fresh wind of God's Spirit, God sent a teacher, he sent a scribe. This is interesting. If you go to Chapter 7, verses 8 through 10, as he is getting commissioned to go, here is the description of what happened.

And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

That's an interesting little description of what a teacher does. He studies the law of God. He does it, and then he teaches it, right? That's a good job description for your pastors. But it's also a good job description for you as a person who is leading others to Christ and discipling them, in this sense: God wants you to study God's word, to do it, and to share it with others, maybe not in the same way as someone who has the gift of teaching and is called into that gift, but God calls for the word of God to be central.

Let me just apply this point before we move on. Let me try to help us. As we begin, God's word needs to be central in your life. That's where the strength comes from. That's where grace and power will come to fuel you to not only get started, but to keep going. As you get into God's word, what will you see? You will see the call to repent and the message of God's grace, that there is forgiveness and provision in Christ. You will see a vision, not only of what God has done to pay for your sin, but of what he wants to accomplish in you. In essence, you see your need and his promise to not just meet that need, but to do fantastic things in your life. And there is a power to overcome very powerful discouragement, life habits that have taken you in the wrong direction for many, many years. Give prominence to the word of God.

- 3.** Believe God for the impossible and the improbable. Here is what transpires in these chapters. Remember, in Chapter 4 a letter was sent to the king, and that letter accused the children of Israel of just being no-good, and the work stopped for 15 years. Now, as they begin the work again, the officials show up (it's a different set of officials) and they say, "Hey, what are you guys doing?" They say, "We are building a temple." And they say, "Well, wait a minute. Stop! Let me go find out if that's okay." The elders (this is commendable) - they say, "Listen, you go find out, but we are not going to stop." So the officials send a letter to the king. They say, "Hey, listen - what do you want us to do?" Do you want us to stop this? Do you want us to keep it going? Is this of you?"

Do you remember what happened the last time a letter was sent? God uses the same thing now to bring about a very different result. The king inquires. He finds out that a decree had been issued for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He not only says it's okay, but he gets behind it and he says, "I want you to not only make sure that this work happens and that these men have protection while they do this, but I want you to pay for it out of the royal treasury." This is really amazing! It has been almost 100 years since this temple was destroyed. You have lived your whole life in fear of the world power - Babylon, now Persia - and now Persia is going to pay for the rebuilding of the temple?! Believe God for the impossible. I said the impossible and the improbable. It was impossible that the work would be allowed to go forward from their perspective, but really improbable that Persia would pay for it.

When we bought this building, this shopping center, as a church -- many of you know this story -- it was God doing the impossible and the improbable. We had been without a building for about two years and we were having trouble finding a location that made sense financially. Every time we found a location, the city it was in wouldn't let us do it. They began to oppose us. Those circumstances really were very formidable. It seemed impossible. And when we found this place, we not only got permission to build here, but the city said, "We want to rent from you, put a high school there, we will help pay for it when you build it out, and we will expedite the permitting."

This is how God works. You are sitting there looking at your life, saying, "I have struggled with this addiction my whole life." "This relationship is beyond repair." "This is a mess in my life." "I will never be able to do this." God wants you to begin again, looking at your own life, repenting of your sin, trusting in him, believing him to do the impossible and the improbable.

It was an unlikely turn of events, and yet God did something wonderful and miraculous for the children of Israel. I would like you to go to the book of Haggai. Go to the very end of the Old Testament. If you get to Matthew, you are in the New Testament. You have gone too far. You will find the last book of the Old Testament: Malachi. Go back a book -- you will find Zechariah -- and then one more and you will find Haggai. Two little chapters, right before Zephaniah. This is the record of Haggai, from Ezra 5:1-2, stirring up the people. This will give you real insight into how these practices work in your life: Beginning again, making the word of God central, prominent, and believing God for the impossible. Look at Chapter One, verses 3-6:

Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes."

He is saying, "You know what? You guys have come back from captivity and you are building your houses, but you are neglecting the temple. It lies in ruins. Your relationship is

not right with God. You don't care about God's presence in your midst, and because of that, there is no satisfaction in your life. You are working, but you are not getting the return on your investment. It's like you are putting everything into a bag with holes in it."

The first part of his message is a call for self-examination, a call to repentance. Often we can look at others and see where they have failed us. And maybe in some cases the brokenness in our lives is attached to some severe things that others have done, but you will not get free looking outside. At some point we have to see the unexplained reality that it's about my relationship with God. And even though those things were not God's will, in another sense God willed it, and he will use it. He is able to do that. He is God. He will use that for good in our lives.

So we say, "Okay, Lord, here is what renewal looks like. It looks like me seeing it almost always begins with repentance. I see my sin, my idols, my rebellion against God, my independence from God, my self-righteousness, my self-justification. Me, me, me, me, me. And though I may have known for years, even decades about my sin and my need of the cross, now as God's Spirit warms my heart, I am renewed as I see that self-justification at a deeper level in a way I never perceived before." I say, "Oh wow, Lord. I have been arguing in my marriage or I have been full of self-pity in this area of my life. I have been full of fear here. I can look back and I see this pattern. I kind of knew I was that way, but I never perceived the sin underneath it, pushing it out." God is renewing you in that moment! He is saying, "Listen, my salvation, my ongoing work of sanctification in your life is a gift! Now come! Come and drink of living water!" And I say, "Lord, forgive me! I'm a mess! I'm in my fifties. I pastor people! I tell people how to do this! I should be better at this! Oh God, thank you for your grace and mercy." Are you there? Does that excite you? Amen!

It's not all a call to repentance, but it's there. Then, Haggai's message moves into encouragement. "The Lord is with you. Be strong." Look at verse 13, for example. "Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, 'I am with you, declares the Lord.'" Go to Chapter 2, verse 3.

Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel (Zerubbabel is the governor, remember), declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua,

son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.

Go to verse 9. "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts."

Here is what's going on. We are nearing the end. There are a few people there who are old enough to know what the former temple looked like, and the new temple is not what the old temple was. The old temple was built in the day of Saul, David, and Solomon - the golden era of the united Twelve Tribes. There was this swell, this increase of prosperity and blessing, so that wise king Solomon, building on the foundation of his father David, built this majestic temple. And God filled it with his glory. Now, they are looking at this temple and it just doesn't measure up. God tells them, "Be strong," then a remarkable claim, where God says, "The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former."

If you are there, remember - it's 50 years later -- the temple is still kind of "hmmmm...," and Ezra has to go back to help adorn it, and fill it, and put some finishing touches on it. In the physical, you look at that temple and you say, "I'm sorry, but this verse 9 is just not happening. It's not more glorious than what was here before." But here is how that verse is fulfilled. This temple was built and remains for another 500 years or a little bit more, and Jesus himself walks the halls of this temple. The fulfillment of what this temple is all about shows up and walks in. And then he says, "You destroy this temple (speaking of his own body) and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus came, saying, "I am the fulfillment of all that this stands for. I am the dwelling place where man meets God. You will kill me and in three days, God will raise it up, and I, in doing so, will pay for your sin, and I, and the Holy Spirit will dwell in the hearts of my people as a result." That is more glorious than what David built 2000 years ago. Yes. Amen.

They couldn't see it, but God is using a prophet with their limited, obscure vision to say, "Don't give up. This matters in my scheme of redemption. I am with you. I am in your midst. This is my work for this day. Don't quit. Begin again. I have a glory that you can't imagine that I am doing through your faithfulness right now, today." So God is calling us,

Special Messages - Restoration

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Riverside. We don't know all the fruit that comes from one act of faithfulness by beginning again, focused on the word of God, ready to seek God for renewal in the power of his gospel. But God will do so much more than we can even imagine. Amen?

Let's pray.