

The Beginnings of Restoration

Ezra 1

To “restore” means to return something or someone to its original condition or place or status. If you restore a piece of furniture, you address its decay; you bring it back as much as you can to its original condition. If you restore a relationship, you bring it back to a place of health that has been lost. If you restore your reputation, you regain the respect and/or trust that has been lost. Inherent in the idea of restoration is “loss.” If you haven’t lost anything you don’t need restoration.

This morning we begin a sermon series about restoration from the OT book of Ezra. Ezra explains how Jews experienced restoration after they had gone into exile in Babylon. The exile was perhaps the greatest “loss” that the Jewish people ever experienced. As a last resort - because they would not respond to His discipline - God sent them into exile to Babylon. It was devastating to lose their land and their freedom and their worship at the temple. And yet God promised to restore them to the Land and to restore worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Since worshiping at the temple was so central to the old covenant, God was essentially restoring their relationship with Him.

As we work our way through Ezra this summer, our prayer is that God will bring restoration to our lives in any of the ways that are needed. You may have experienced a loss that is analogous to the exile - a deep loss that makes you wonder if things will ever be the same again: the loss of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, the loss of reputation, the loss of a career. Some of these specific losses might be restored in this life, but others will not. [Not everyone who went into exile returned to the Land.]

But perhaps there is a deeper restoration that needs to take place in your life. Just as the exile pointed to a deeper restoration that needed to take place in Ezra’s day, perhaps the losses you’ve experienced point to a deeper restoration that needs to take place in your relationship with God.

Perhaps the disappointments in your life have made you disillusioned in your relationship with God. You used to hear God’s voice when you read or listened to His word; you used to trust God in very tangible ways; you used to pray prayers in faith. But now you have pulled back to a safe place; you don’t expect much of God so you can’t be disappointed. Even the simplest of commands or statements in Scripture seem confused and complicated to you. If I’m describing you, you need to be restored to what Paul called “simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Perhaps there is an area of prolonged disobedience in your life. You may not even think that obedience is possible anymore; you’re just trying to manage your disobedience and avoid the fallout as much as possible. You might need to be restored to a place where you believe that God can work in your life. You need to be restored to a place where you know that God is “for you.”

Perhaps you've become so overwhelmed with life that your relationship with God gets little attention. You can occasionally manage to get to worship but you neglect God throughout the week. You need to be restored to a place where you seek Him with joy again - where you pray and receive Scripture and serve because you want to, not because you're "supposed to."

It may be that you've never really experienced the type of relationship with God that is described in the Bible. Technically you don't need to be restored to something you've experienced in the past; but you need God to do something new and fresh in your relationship with Him.

As we work our way through Ezra, we'd encourage you to be open to the restoration that might need to take place in your relationship with God. It might take some time to discern what this restoration might be in your life. Today's passage talks about the beginnings of the restoration the exiles experienced; it gives us some direction for discerning what the beginnings of our restoration might look like.

The Beginnings of Restoration for the Exiles (Ezra 1)

The first verse of this book establishes the plot both historically and theologically.

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

Some seventy years earlier Babylon had conquered Jerusalem and deported most of its people to Babylon (over 500 miles to the east). The Babylonians tried to destroy the cultural identity of the people they conquered by uprooting them from their land, plundering and destroying their sacred buildings, and forcing them to worship Babylonian gods. Their policy was to assimilate conquered people into Babylonian culture. Leaders like Daniel and Ezekiel sought to keep the Jews in Babylon faithful to their God.

Cyrus was the king of Persia who conquered Babylon in 539 b.c. Cyrus had a very different policy. He believed that people would be loyal subjects if they were allowed to live in their own land and worship their own gods. True to this policy, Cyrus issued a decree that allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and reestablish temple worship. Extra biblical sources tell us that Cyrus issued similar decrees for other nations that the Babylonians had conquered.

Ezra 1:1 tells us that Cyrus' political calculations were actually a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah had prophesied that after 70 years God would bring the people back from exile in Babylon. For example, Jeremiah 29:10 reads:

10 “For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.’”

God was on record that He would restore His people to the Land. Notice again what we read in Ezra 1:1.

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, ***in order to fulfill the word of the Lord*** by the mouth of Jeremiah, ***the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus*** king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

God fulfilled this prophecy by “stirring up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.” God can accomplish His purposes in any way He chooses. In this situation He chose to stir up (or move) the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. Two hundred years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied that a man named Cyrus would rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. In Isaiah 44 and 45 God refers to this “Cyrus” as “My shepherd” and His “anointed” (sometimes translated messiah). We don’t have clear evidence whether or not Cyrus was a genuine believer in the God of Israel. The fact remains that God can stir up (or “move”) ***anyone*** to accomplish His purposes and to fulfill His word.

We are told here that Cyrus sent a proclamation throughout all His kingdom. The detail that he “also put it in writing” will be important later in Ezra because the people living in and around Jerusalem challenged the rebuilding of the temple; the next king, Darius, would be able to look through the archives and find this decree from Cyrus confirming that the Jews had been authorized to rebuild (Ezra 6).

Verses 2 through 4 record the actual decree.

2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 ‘Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 ‘Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.’”

Cyrus acknowledges that God had given him dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth and had appointed him to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. He authorizes any “survivor” (verse 4 - anybody who had survived in exile) who wanted to return to do so. He also commands the neighbors of those who returned to Jerusalem to support them with “silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.” We’ll see in verse 6 that the people actually gifted those who returned with these items.

Verse 5 records the response among the exiles to Cyrus’ proclamation:

5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

Judah and Benjamin were the two primary tribes living in Jerusalem when the Babylonians conquered Israel. Ezra mentions here that the leaders of Judah and Benjamin "and the priests and the Levites [who carried out worship at the temple] arose" to return to the Land. Significantly Ezra adds "even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." Just as God had stirred up Cyrus to issue his decree, He stirred up individuals to return to Jerusalem. God created the desire within some to return and rebuild the temple.

The implication is that there were others who did not return to the Land. After all, many if not most of the exiles had been born in Babylon. As Jeremiah had instructed them, they had built houses, planted gardens, and given birth to children and grandchildren (see Jeremiah 29). And so some stayed behind. But God had stirred up others to return to Jerusalem. As we'll see in our study of Ezra, God would do a great work in restoring them to the Land and to temple worship, but those who returned would need courage and faith. God stirred them up, but they would need to fully engage their hearts and minds in the work. [The same will be true for us as we pursue restoration in our lives.]

Verse 6 tells us that the exiles didn't return to Jerusalem empty-handed. They brought the wealth of Babylon with them.

6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.

This description was probably meant to echo the experience of the children of Israel leaving Egypt. We are told in Exodus 12:35-36 that the children of Israel requested from the Egyptians "articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing." Even though these riches were given freely, we are told that they "plundered the Egyptians." Something similar happened when the people returned to the Land after the exile; they returned with the wealth of Babylon.

They also returned with the articles that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

Verses 9-11 give an inventory of the articles carried back to Jerusalem:

9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles. 11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Chapter 1 ends with the people back in Jerusalem along with the articles that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar 70 years earlier. Because God had fulfilled His word through Jeremiah and because God had stirred up the heart of Cyrus and the hearts of the people in exile, the process of restoration had begun.

You might be wondering, “So what does the restoration of the Jewish people to Jerusalem and to temple worship have to do with us?” That’s a good question to ask. We should always ask the question “So what?” when we study the Bible. We study the text for **meaning**, and then we ask “So what?” to discern the **significance** of that meaning for us. The significance should flow from the meaning.

Since the Bible is about God, we begin by noticing what Ezra 1 reveals about God. In Ezra 1 we see that **God is a God who keeps His word**. He fulfilled the prophecy given through Jeremiah that He would bring the people back from exile in Babylon. He fulfilled the prophecy through Isaiah that He would raise up Cyrus as a shepherd and messiah (small “m”) to lead the people back to the Land. God is a **God who keeps His word**. And **God is a God who moves in the lives of people**. He stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to issue a proclamation and He stirred the spirits of people to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Since “keeping His word” and moving in the lives of people marked the beginning of restoration in Ezra’s day, it seems to me that we should pay attention to these two things if we want restoration in our day. If God wanted to restore the exiles to a full relationship with Himself (through temple worship in Jerusalem), surely God wants to restore areas of our lives that need to be renewed. In our time remaining, I want us to think about the beginnings of restoration in our lives.

The Beginnings of Restoration in our Lives.

In coming weeks the book of Ezra will raise various issues that have an impact in the restoration we need to experience. We’ll talk about facing disappointments head-on (instead of ignoring them); we’ll talk about the opposition we face (internal and external); we’ll talk about the need for seeking God fervently (prayer and fasting); we’ll talk about taking tangible steps of repentance. But this morning I want us to think about **the beginnings of restoration** in our lives. In light of what we’ve seen about God in Ezra 1, consider these two steps:

Put yourself in a position to receive God’s Word and hear His voice.

Just as God was true to His word in Ezra’s day, God is true to His word today. His word explains what we should be experiencing and what we should be expecting from Him. If

we aren't honestly, deeply, consistently listening to God through the Scriptures, we will be confused about what God wants to restore in our lives. This perspective is reflected in many different Scriptures. For example, in John 8:31-32 we read:

31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

The progression is from "continuing" (or abiding) in Jesus word to knowing the truth to experiencing freedom. If we want to experience freedom (if we want to experience restoration in our relationship with God), we have to put ourselves in a position to experience this progression; we have to be attentive to God's voice through the Scriptures.

I'd simply encourage you to be honest with yourself and honest with God. Are you abiding in Jesus' words? Do you make it your ambition each day to saturate your heart and mind with His truth, or is God's word an afterthought? Are you hungry and thirsty for the truth of Scripture? Are you desperate to hear God's voice or do you have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude? Do you listen eagerly for God's voice, or do you basically ignore Him day after day?

I don't ask you these questions to make you feel condemnation or shame. I ask you these questions to help you be honest. Eventually we need to get to the place in our lives where we stop pretending, we stop caring so much about looking spiritual; we need to get to the place where we care more about hearing God's voice than any other voice in our lives. His voice is the truest and most insightful voice; therefore it deserves our full attention.

If we want to experience restoration in some area of our relationship with God, we need to begin by putting ourselves in a position to receive His word and hear His voice. As you do so . . .

Pay attention to ways that God "stirring up" your spirit in response to His Word.

Of course God can stir up our spirits (i.e., prompt us to obedience) in many different ways. But the primary way He prompts us is through His Word. As you listen to God's Word, notice ways that God is stirring you up. . . . desires that He is creating within you. Don't be afraid that God will demand something of you that you can't "pull off"; if God stirs up something within you, He will empower you to pursue it.

- A desire for obedience in some area of your life: purity, speech, self-control, generosity, compassion. Sometimes God will stir you up with an intense desire to restore you to a place of obedience in some area of your life.
- Perhaps God is stirring you up to serve Him in some way. Sometimes God places a burden on our hearts for some type of service/outreach.
- Perhaps God wants to bring restoration to your speech. Sometimes God convicts us that our words are selfish and destructive. A verse like Ephesians 4:29 challenges us

to “let no unwholesome word proceed” from our mouths. . . but only those words that meet needs and build others up.

These are just suggestions/possibilities. Again, you don’t have to figure out how to pull off whatever God is stirring within you (any more than the exiles had to figure out how to pull off returning and rebuilding). You mainly need to pay attention to what God is moving you to do and to be as you receive His Word. In coming weeks we’ll talk about our response; but we begin by paying attention to what God is stirring within us.

Our confidence in experiencing restoration rests in God’s commitment to us in Christ Jesus. Last Sunday Brian taught through the last paragraph in Romans 8. In verse 32 Paul points out that since God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all,” that He will “freely give us all things.” You and I aren’t smart enough, committed enough, or powerful enough to bring about the restoration we need. But God is all those things and more. He proved it at the cross. God will freely with Him give us everything we need to experience restoration.

Let’s pray that we’d be attentive to His voice and that we’d discern how He is moving within us - both as individuals and as a body.