

Restoration: Facing our Disappointments

Ezra 3

Last week we began a sermon series from the book of Ezra. The plot of Ezra revolves around God restoring the people back to the Land and back to temple worship after they had been in exile in Babylon. We saw in Ezra 1 that God kept His word and brought them back to the Land. He did this by stirring the heart of Cyrus to issue a decree and the hearts of some of the exiles to return. That was the beginning of their restoration.

I encouraged you to try to discern ways that God might want to bring restoration into your life. . . ways He might want to restore your relationship with Him. I asked several people at Faith to share with me what God was stirring with them in terms of restoration. Here are the responses I received from four different people:

#1 “For too long I have lost my energy to serve beyond a surface-level. This is partly due to too many earthly commitments, and partly due to the constant nagging of Satan telling me that I'm not good enough. Based on my past, I know my closest times with the Lord are most often during a crisis. I'm just not up for a crisis. I've pulled back and played it safe.”

#2 “Purity is definitely the biggest one on my radar. It's hard to draw near to God when I am struggling with that issue. Delight is another one. It's been a while since I've had great delight in the Lord. I've decided to seek God on those two issues as we journey through Ezra.”

#3 “God really spoke to me through the sermon and I sensed a desire on his part to renew/restore my devotional life (i.e. prayer and bible study). He asked me to change some habits and give up (this sounds silly) a video game I would play before bed to be more intentional in prayer before bed. I have great anticipation that he is 're-ordering my loves' further in this area of my life.”

#4 “I came into marriage with my husband already having had many other intimate partners, most of which were unhealthy relationships in more ways than one. Then, upon becoming a believer and follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit began slowly revealing to me just how damaged I was because of these relationships. It has, as a result, caused some serious issues in our marriage. It may seem that this is an issue that is more about my relationship with my husband than with God but as with all issues of the heart, they all ultimately begin first with our relationship with our Heavenly Father and what we choose to believe or not believe. . . Ecclesiastes 3:11 is a verse that is very important to me, very simply, it says "He has made everything beautiful in its time." This is what my God does, He is the king of restoration, He makes all things beautiful again and even though there is still struggle I have found significant peace and, strangely, strength in this.”

These are some of the things God is stirring up within people. These are the beginnings of their restoration. If you haven't identified ways that God might be stirring you up and

giving you the desire for restoration, keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Everything we know about God would suggest that He is more gracious than we ever imagined. I believe He will show you what He wants to do in your life.

Today we are going to consider Ezra 3 which records the disappointment that some experienced after the foundation for the temple had been laid. We will see that the prophets forced them to address their disappointments head-on. You and I will face disappointments as we trust God for restoration in various areas of our lives. Restoration is rarely clean and easy; it usually involves deep disappointments.

We are first going to notice the disappointment that some experienced after the foundation of the temple had been laid; then we'll see how the prophet Haggai forced them to confront their disappointment. These passages can give us some perspective on the disappointments we face.

Restoring Temple Worship: Dealing with Disappointments (Ezra 3, Haggai 2)

The first nine verses explain how they built an altar, began offering sacrifices, and celebrated festivals stipulated in the Law. They then hired masons and carpenters, bought supplies, and began laying the foundation of the temple. We read that the Levites 20 years and older gave oversight to this work.

Beginning in verse 10 we read about the celebration that took place after the foundation of the temple was laid. We tend to celebrate “groundbreakings” and grand openings, but they celebrated the laying of the foundation.

10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of King David of Israel.

After the foundation had been laid, they worshiped according to the directions David had given. Verse 11 records the song they sang while the priests played their trumpets and the Levites their cymbals:

11 They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

If you read through the Old Testament, you see that the goodness of God was rehearsed throughout the history of Israel. Here we read that even though God had disciplined them more severely than they expected by taking them into exile (see Isaiah 40:2), they affirmed that “God is good.” He had brought them back to the Land and allowed them to lay the foundation of the temple. This is evidence that “His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” Lovingkindness was often used of God’s

covenant love for Israel; because He had entered into a covenant with Israel, He would pursue her relentlessly until she responded in love.

Because they recognized that God's steadfast love allowed them to lay the foundation of the temple, "all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord." Think of football-stadium loud; verse 13 will tell us that "the sound was heard far away." Their praise was loud and heart-felt. The restoration God had promised was coming to fruition.

And yet some in their midst grieved that this new temple wasn't going to be identical to the temple Solomon had built. Listen to verses 12 and 13.

12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

We aren't told here exactly **why** the old men who had seen the first temple "wept with a loud voice." But other Scriptures (Haggai 2:3ff, Zechariah 4:10) suggest that they wept because they realized that this new temple would be smaller than Solomon's temple, the one that had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The old men who had seen the first temple aren't condemned for weeping over the foundations of the new temple. But eventually they needed to accept that God was doing something different in their day. If they wanted to experience restoration, they would have to accept that God had every right to restore them to a temple that was smaller and that had less grandeur (externally, at least) than Solomon's temple.

Two of the prophets that God sent to the Jewish people after the exile were Haggai and Zechariah. Their prophecies make clear that the disappointment over the new temple being smaller than Solomon's temple spread and took root among the people. Their disappointment had the potential of thwarting the restoration God wanted to give. The prophet Haggai addressed this disappointment in Haggai 2. Given that Haggai 2 was written approximately 20 years after the events of Ezra 3, we have confirmation that their disappointment had gotten lodged in their souls.

3 'Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?

Haggai confronts the attitude that says, "Since the new temple isn't as big as the old temple, I don't want anything to do with it. Since this temple is less glorious than Solomon's temple, it's not worth our time and effort."

In the rest of this chapter Haggai very skillfully exposes the fallacy in this way of thinking. For example, in verse 4 he says this:

4 'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the Lord, 'and work; for I am with you,' declares the Lord of hosts.

We see throughout Scripture that the presence of God trumped every threat that people faced. Jesus said something similar after commissioning the church to "make disciples of all the nations"; He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The Jews in Ezra's day needed to know that **since God was with them**, they should "take courage. . . and work." Without courage it's hard to work hard and trust God.

Furthermore, Haggai lets them know that just because the new temple was smaller than the first, that didn't mean that it would be less glorious. We read this in verses 7-9:

7 'I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord of hosts. 8 'The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,' declares the Lord of hosts. 9 'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the Lord of hosts."

Haggai prophesies that the glory of the new temple would be "greater than" the glory of Solomon's temple. Even though it would be smaller and less ornate, the temple they were building would have more glory - primarily (we now understand) because some 500 years later Jesus, the Lord incarnate, the Prince of Peace would worship at **that** temple. After the crucifixion of Jesus, the veil in **that** temple separating the holy of holies from the outer court would be torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that through Jesus all who believe have free and full access to God.

The people in Ezra's day needed to understand that even though the new temple would be smaller, God was doing a greater thing (and a deeper thing) in their day. They needed to see their restoration in light of the larger story of what God was doing. And so in Zechariah 4:10 Zechariah speaks against "despising the day of small things." His diagnosis was that the people of his day "despised" what God was doing because it appear to them to be "smaller." They couldn't simultaneously despise what God was doing and experience restoration. And so they needed to face their disappointment head-on and admit that God had every right to do something different in their day. Until they got to that point, the restoration God wanted to bring was hindered.

Let's think about the implications of Ezra 3 and Haggai 2 for the restoration God is bringing us in our day.

The example of restoration in Ezra's day suggests at least two things:

Identify and confront disappointments head-on. Like the people in Ezra's day, there will be times when we are disappointed with the way God is working in our lives. Many times the problem is the same as we've seen in Ezra 3 and Haggai 2: comparison. They compared the new temple with the old and were disappointed.

If you've been a believer (or at least a church-goer) for a long time, it may be that you compare everything that happens in your life and in the church now to some "sweet spot" in your past - a time in the past that shines brightly for you. It could have been a time when God was working in your life in some dramatic ways; your relationship with God seemed very immediate and exciting. It could have been a time when you liked everything about the church - its size (maybe because you knew everybody by name), its music, its structures, its feel.

Perhaps you tend to compare how God is working in your life with ways He has worked in others' lives. Or maybe you look around and it seems like most people simply have it a lot easier than you do. Or maybe you've thought, "If I had his life (or her life) I sure wouldn't belly-ache so much. I'd have it made. . ." When we think this way too long we get discouraged.

Or perhaps our discouragement comes from comparing what we thought would happen in our lives with what has actually happened - comparing our expectations with the realities. Here's what one person wrote when I asked what God was stirring up in relation to restoration:

"Remembering when I was a young Christian and wrestling with various struggles that kept me from having a richer relationship with God, I foolishly thought the struggles I had with my lustful thought-life would fade away as I got older. So here I am four decades later with some of the same struggles with my thought-life and the temptations that follow. The hardest times are when things are going really well or when things are going really bad. As much as I know first-hand the danger this poses to my relationship with my family and my profession, as well as my fellowship with God, the temptation is never far away."

Do you sense some disappointment there? As you think about the restoration that God might want to bring into your life, can you identify ways that you are disappointed with God? I'm impressed with the way that the prophets challenged the people to face their disappointments head-on. I think they would tell us the same things that they told the people in their day:

Acknowledge that God might be doing something different today than what He has done in the past.

The people in Ezra's day took twenty years to conclude that God had every right to do something different in their day than He did in Solomon's day. Their resistance to God doing a new thing delayed and thwarted what God wanted to do in their midst. Wouldn't it be tragic if you and I (individually and as a church) missed what God wanted to do in

our lives and in our midst because we couldn't accept that God might be doing something different today than He has done in the past?

Earlier I mentioned that your disappointment comes from comparing what God is (or isn't) doing now with some sweet spot in the past. There is nothing wrong with remembering former experiences with great affection; I don't think there was anything wrong with the old men in Ezra 3 weeping when they saw the foundation of the new temple. But as Steve Garber points out (*Visions of Vocation*, p. 71): "There is no golden moment historically. Pre-modern, modern, post-modern: every age is marked by graces and groans." I agree. Even though some times in our lives are sweeter than others, every age is marked by graces and groans.

We need to acknowledge that God has the freedom to do new things in our day. This obviously doesn't justify every new thing that the church attempts; and it doesn't mean that new is necessarily good. [See note below.] But at the very least it means that we should be open to new ways that God is leading us as individuals and as a church. We should admit that God has the freedom to work in our lives in any way He desires through any means He wants to employ. In other words, we shouldn't say to God, "You must work in our lives and in our midst only in these three ways. . . otherwise we aren't interested." If we're not careful, we can end up "despising" something that God is doing - which is a spiritually dangerous thing to do.

I am going to read one more paragraph from someone at Faith who has come to understand that God has the freedom to work any way that He chooses. Be encouraged by this as you think about the restoration God might be bringing into your life.

"God has restored my mental health from a place where I was experiencing crippling depression, anxiety and panic attacks to a place where I am mentally and spiritually healthy. He did this, not in the way I hoped he would (by instantaneous healing), but through a slow process of spiritual and professional mental health support, healthy friendships, and mental health medications. Today I am able to experience a compassion for those battling mental and spiritual health issues like I never would have been able to before this part of my journey, as well as an immense gratitude to God who freed me from that prison!"

If she had demanded, "God, unless you heal me instantaneously, I'm not interested. . ." she would have missed the restoration God was giving her.

As we come to the Lord's table today, I'd encourage you to bring to God this issue of restoration. Bring your disappointments to God, and (if you are able) acknowledge that God has the freedom to work in your life in any way that He chooses. If you are not able, you could express to God that you are willing to let Him lead you to that place. At the Lord's table we remember that God has done the "greatest thing" for us - giving His one and only Son as payment for our sins. Therefore we can rest assured that He will do every "lesser thing" that we might need for the restoration we need.

Note: At Faith, we've found it helpful to use the categories of form vs. function. The functions are those things that are mentioned in Scripture that never change: the one-anothers of Scripture, gathering together for worship, the mission of making disciples of all the nations. Functions don't change from culture to culture or generation to generation. But the forms that we use to live out those functions can change: where we meet, styles of music, order of worship, etc.