

A Second Exodus

Ezra Overview

(preached Pine Grove 4/12/15; Sunday PM)

Introduction

Hale Irwin is a name that some of you may know and some maybe not.

But Irwin is a professional golfer who played on the PGA tour from 1971 to 1994...

Over those 23 years, he won 20 tournaments and over 6 million dollars in prize money.

An in 1994, at the age of 49, Irwin left the PGA tour.

However, golf is not like the other major sports because golf has what they now call the Champions Tour...

It is a new lease on life for a lot of these men because you have to be over 50 to take part in the tournaments.

And hale Irwin made the most of this second chance at a career.

On the senior tour, Irwin won 49 tournaments and over 26 million dollars!

That was over 4 times as much as he made on the regular tour.

And over twice as many victories.

Now, that is what I call making the most of a second chance.

Some would say that he did pretty good at his first chance, but there is no doubt that he won more and won more money in his second opportunity...

To play golf for a living.

Well, second chances are a way of life for many of us.

Whether those are second chances at a job or a relationship or simply a second chance at life that comes after recovering from a sickness.

Well the story of the book of Ezra is the story of a second chance for the nation of Israel.

It is the story of God rescuing His people from a foreign land, and bringing them back to their land.

It is the story of God's faithfulness to his people.

It is the story of second chances for a nation.

Now in reality, this is probably Israel's 100th chance.

Because they had been a disobedient people for years.

Yet, God never let go of them.

He never abandoned them.

Disciplined them? You bet!

Sent them out of the land? Yes sir!

Broke his promise to them? No way.

You ever worked with cling wrap?

You try to hold it apart but it just keeps sticking together...

And the more you toss your hand to try to cast it off, the tighter it clings...

That is a great picture of God's faithfulness to Israel..

They can't cast off his love and faithfulness to them.

The Bible describes God's love for His people as HESED love....

We talked about this in the 23rd psalm...

Do you remember how that psalm ends....

Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever...

Well, the word follow is not a strong enough word, the better translation of follow is pursue me..

And the word mercy is better translated "lovingkindness."

Which would make the last verse...

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will pursue me all the days of my life...

That is the picture of God's love for His people..

He pursues them...

He chases them..

Yes, he removes them and chastises them...

But He never stops his relationship with them...

I have mentioned this before on Wednesday night, but some old Puritna pastors used to refer to God as "The Hound of Heaven."

Which gives us this picture in our minds of a bloodhound on the trail of its prey...

Doesn't matter whether the trail goes through thick woods, briar patches, a creek...

That dog simply keeps his head down and tracks it prey..

And I love that picture of God, and isn't irreverent at all...

What did Jesus compare God to in Luke 15?

To a shepherd who would leave his flock of 99 and go seek out the one sheep who had wandered off.

Then to a woman who had lost a coin and cleaned the whole house searches for that treasure..

Then to a king who went out to greet his long lost prodigal son..

This picture of a God who pursues sinners is the picture of the God of the Bible....

That is why we sing....

His love reaches to the highest mountain and goes to the lowest valley...

And in Ezra, we are going to see this truth before our very eyes..

As God is going to call his people out of bondage and back to the land..

Now, to catch us up to speed since we missed last Sunday night...

Let's do a quick review of all that we have seen in the Bible since Genesis...

After the fall and the flood, God calls Abraham to follow him and promises to make him a great nation.

Abraham obeys and the nation of Israel is born.

In Exodus, the nation gets big and gets freed from slavery to the Egyptians, and they head to a land that God had promised Abraham.

In Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, they get God's law that will be their guide in their new land..

And in Joshua, they finally get the land..

The book of Judges is the story of Israel's disobedience in the land.

Though they had been led by Moses and Joshua, God now sends judges to rule the nation.

That helps but the people want a king like the other nations, so in 1 Samuel, God gives them a king...

King Saul, who gives way to Israel's greatest King, King David in 2 Samuel..

But those glory days of Israel end in 1 kings when David's son Solomon becomes the last king of a united nation...

And in 1 Kings, the nation splits into two parts...

Israel in the north and Judah in the south...

Then it gets worse because each nation then is conquered by other nations...

The northern kingdom of Israel falls in 722 BC to the Assyrians...

And the southern kingdom of Judah finally falls in 596 BC to the Babylonians...

And all that happens in 2 kings...

Then last time we were together, we looked at the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles which were simply the retelling of the story of Israel's fall from grace....

Much of the information in those two book was simply a repeat of how Israel divided into two kingdoms..

And then both fell to Assyria and Babylon...

But there was a simple twist to Chronicles that wasn't in either 1 or 2 Kings...

And the twist was that Chronicles ends with a hint of hope for Israel.

The final verses of 2 Chronicles reveal that Israel is now free to return to their land...

And what is interesting about the book of Ezra is that it begins with almost the exact same wording of the end of Chronicles...

So, Ezra is going to be a continuation of this theme of hope for the nation...

It is almost like a second exodus for Israel...

In the book of Exodus, Israel escaped Egyptian bondage and headed to the Promised Land..

In Ezra, Israel is escaping Babylonian bondage and getting a second chance in the Promised Land...

However, there is another important difference as well....

When Israel walked out of Egypt, they all came out together...

That won't be true this time.

The return to the Promised Land is going to happen in stages...

The first group to return is going to be lead back by Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple in 538 BC....

The second group is going to return to the land 80 years later beginning in 458 BC under the leadership of Ezra..

And the final group will come back to the Promised Land in 444 BC under the leadership of Nehemiah, which we will look at next week in that book.

We are going to deal with the first two returns to the land tonight..

Our outline will simply be based upon these returns to Israel..

I. The First Return and Reconstruction under Zerubbabel (1 -6)

- A. Let's Go (1)
- B. Let's Count (2)
- C. Let's Build (3-6:15)
- D. Let's Dedicate (6:16-22)

II. The Second Return and Reform under Ezra (7 – 10)

- A. Let's Return (7-8)
- B. Let's Reform (9-10)

I. The First Return and Reconstruction under Zerubbabel (1 -6)

A. Let's Go (1)

As Ezra opens, we see a repeat of the proclamation that allowed the Jews to return to the land...

Look at the first few verses of Ezra with me....

I 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:

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.

Couple things to notice here..

Cyrus is not an Israelite....

He is the king of the Persian empire.

An important man, a powerful man, a wealthy man...

But we need to understand something...

No man is beyond the Lord's reach, and the people and plans of no nation come before the Lord's plan.

God had predicted that Israel would be in captivity for 70 years..

The 70 years are up and it is time for God's people to return to their land...

And God will use any means necessary and anyone to accomplish his purposes..

So the verse says that He stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to do what needed to be done to bring about his plan.

Do you know how important the word of God is?

It is so important and trustworthy that no king or kingdom can overcome it...

God's purpose is supreme in this world, and everything that you see around you...

Whether that be the rise and fall of nations...

Or the change in the economies of the world or even the weather patterns of the world....

Or the change of world politicians...

All of it works according to the plan of God and nothing is done except what God allows to be done...

And so God moves to stir up a pagan king...

But second, God also stirs up the spirit of the people to go back as well..

And the remaining part of chapter 1 is God prompting his people to go back as well...

So, they get ready to head back but before they do, they take a head count in chapter 2...

B. Let's Count (2)

And there we find a list of people who returned to the Promised Land with this first group of Israelites..

It is a group that when all the numbers are added resulted in a group of about 50,000 Israelites who head back in this first group to return...

C. Let's Build (3-6:15)

After getting back in the land, they get back to the practice of worshipping God...

They meet together..

They sacrificed to the Lord....

They sang together to the Lord..

And they begin to lay a foundation for a new temple...

And we find something interesting in 3:12...

¹² Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first ^[h]temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy

This second temple, though it caused joy for some, caused grief for the generation who had seen Solomon's temple..

Obviously, this temple was going to be smaller and less glorious.

And some of the older generation simply wept when they realized that the glory days of Israel had passed..

Beyond that discouragement, those trying to rebuild the temple faced discouragement from people who had settled the land in their absence..

They tried to prevent a temple from being built in chapter 4 and work on the temple even stops for a while..

But in Ezra 5, Haggai, a prophet of God encourages the people to resume the work on the temple and they listen to him...

Eventually in chapter 6, verse 15, this second temple was completed....

D. Let's Dedicate (6:16-22)

And in the closing verses of chapter 6...

The people celebrate the re-building of the temple by observing Passover....

Now, what was Passover a celebration of?

It was a celebration of God delivering Israel from their captivity in Egypt.

And here the people almost 900 years after the first Passover celebrating a Passover of their own as they have not been delivering from their captivity in Babylon....

And that brings us to this second section of Ezra that begins in chapter 7...

The first group has returned under Zerubbabel and rebuilt the temple.

Now 52 years pass in the land, and Ezra leads the second group back in 458 BC...

II. The Second Return and Reform under Ezra (7 – 10)

A. Let's Return (7-8)

In chapter 7, we meet Ezra.

The first thing we need to notice is that Ezra is skilled in the law of God...

Look at verse 6 of chapter 7...

⁶ This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given

And then look at verse 10...

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to ^[c]study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Notice the order of Ezra's life...

HE studied the law of God, then practiced it, and then taught it...

That is still the model today..

A man must prove himself true in his personal life before he is ever allowed to stand up and teach the word of God...

And so, we know that Ezra is a good leader and so God moves to send another group back to the land under his leadership...

WE see that in verse 13...

And now ¹³ I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.

Remember this is 458 BC; it has been 80 years since the first group went back under Zerubbabel.

Now, a second group is led out by Ezra.

And again we see another king issue a decree to send Israel back to the land.

If you weren't convinced that God can change the heart of a king when the first group returned, here is God doing it again with a completely different king.

So, here is the second group readying themselves to leave...

They eventually arrive in Jerusalem in 8:32, and they immediately offer sacrifices to God.

That leads us to chapter 9, and Ezra is told of how the Israelites are marrying the pagans of the area...

B. Let's Reform (9-10)

In the opening verses of chapter 9, Ezra receives a report of what is happening in the land.

The Israelites have been marrying the pagan people of the land...

The Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jeusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.

In Deuteronomy 7, before Israel went into the land the first time, God instructed Israel not to marry the people of the land...

And again, this is not a skin color issue...

This is not a rich poor issue...

This is not a bad family/good family issue...

This is strictly a spiritual issue..

God's standard for marriage has not changed even today.

You must be equally yoked with your spouse...

Believers are forbidden in Scripture from marrying unbelievers...

And why is that?

People will say "Oh I will win them over."

Or "it will give me a chance to work on them with the gospel."

However God forbids it because the closest relationship that you have on earth is with your spouse...

And the influence in marriage goes one way...

It doesn't increase the gospel in the unbelievers heart..

It increases the sin in your heart...

And that was the problem in Israel here.

Now understand this...

Why did Israel and Judah originally fall into captivity?

Their continued sin and worship of false gods...

And how did they find those false gods?

By marrying the pagan people of the Promised Land.

How quickly do we forget the sins that lead to our destruction!

Israel has been back in the land 80 years and they are already back in the sins that led them to be kicked out...

And notice what it says at the end of verse 2...

indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

The leadership of Israel were the ones doing the most intermarrying....

And the principle is simple..

When the leaders fall into sin, the people quickly follow, and what a shame that is.

And so how does God correct this situation?

He sends Ezra, a man who studies and practices the law to lead the people.

That is why the church of today doesn't need businessmen and people with visions...

Or even these charismatic personalities leading the church...

Do you know what the church needs today?

It needs pastors who study and live the word in their lives.

IT needs pastors who are saying no to sin in their lives before they encourage the people to turn from sin in their lives...

We don't need celebrities leading the church, we need men committed to the study of God's Word who are living holy lives...

And that is what Israel needed in this day, and so God has sent Ezra to reform the people...

And we need to take note of what Ezra did to call the people to repentance...

Look at verse 5 of chapter 9...

He begins with a prayer of confession to God...

And in this prayer, we learn some disturbing truths about sin...

Look at verse 6 of the prayer...

⁶ and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have ^[d]risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

#1 – Sin causes shame..

Sin leads to shame in our lives.

There is no question about that.

And shame is a healthy response to sin, and a good response to sin.

Acknowledging your shame will lead to repentance and confession.

Ignoring your shame will lead to more and more sin.

Shame is the smoke detector of your life...

Listen to it and live.

Ignore it and the fire of sin will kill you.

#2 – Sin has devastating consequences...

Verse 7...

⁷ Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to ^[e]open shame, as it is this day.

Sin sent Israel out of the land in Assyria and Babylon.

Sin led to the nation splitting into two kingdoms.

Sin led to all kinds of problems in the nation.

And sin will lead to consequences in your life as well..

The old saying is full of truth..

“Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay.”

3 – Sin disrespects grace..

⁸ But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. ⁹ For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

¹⁰ “Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, ¹¹ which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean

land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.¹² So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’¹³ After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this,¹⁴ shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples ^[I]who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us ^[g]to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?

Israel had been shown incredible grace.

God had not left them in Babylon forever, but had brought them back to the land...

Yet, they had almost immediately fallen into sin.

You can almost hear your mom saying in the background after you disobey her...

“IS this the kind of thanks that I get for feeding you and washing your clothes and taking care of you?”

You go out of disobey me?

Yet, that is what Israel had done to God.

And it is what we do to God when we sin against him...

God provides for all your needs, and then when we sin, we disgrace the grace that HE has shown us.

But finally we see another truth about sin in Ezra's prayer...

#4 – Sin calls for judgment.

Verse 15...

¹⁵ O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

Ezra ends his prayer with a final about sin.

It ultimately separates man from God.

No sinner is able to stand before a righteous God.

And that is a huge problem.

And the only answer to that is the grace of God.

He holds the upperhand, yet he isn't heavy handed...

For Israel, he is going to show mercy and grace as HE brings about his ultimate show of mercy that comes at the cross.

In the meantime, God is going to receive their sacrifices and answer their prayers and continue to honor His promises to Israel.

Then in chapter 10, we see an amazing thing...

The people listen to Ezra's prayer of confession and they confess their sin as well and then repent of their sins against God.

Chapter 10 ends with a look at what true repentance looks like...

The people not only confess their sin, they take righteous action to correct their sin....

The intermarrying among the pagan people stops, and the people vow to do it no longer...

Conclusion

The book of Ezra ends on that note, as this second group of exiles return to the land and look to reform it..

The first group built a temple to worship God...

The second group made sure the worshippers at that temple were worthy of worship.

God desires to be worshipped, but he also desires that the worship be offered by repentant and holy people.

Ezra has done his part to contribute to the holiness of the people.

There is yet one more group to come back but they will have until next week and return with Nehemiah..

Let us pray...