

Fourth Sunday after Easter

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[0 : 00] The title of what I want to share with you is Spiritual Captivity and Its Remedy, because we're in Ezra 9, as we've read, but I also want to take us to John 16, which we read as well.

And the verse to focus our thoughts is Galatians 5.1. For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For freedom, Christ has set us free.

Shall we pray? Father, we ask that by your Holy Spirit, your word written will be so engraved in our hearts and minds that we will trust you more deeply, walk with you more faithfully, serve you with greater delight this day and as we go forward in the rest of the week.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Now tell me, what do you think, well you don't have to answer, but what do you think is the attraction in the spiritual but not religious movement that has so many followers today?

[1 : 24] The spiritual but not religious movement that has so many followers? I think that part of it must be the promise of a kind of freedom.

Freedom from the control that's imposed on us by fixed sets of beliefs and practices. And that's why a popular writer by the name of Iyanla Van Zandt can define religion as the rules, regulations, ceremonies, rituals developed by man to create conformity and uniformity in the approach to God. While she says spirituality is God's call in your soul. And the point, her point, is clear enough. With spirituality, we have a sense of a direct relationship with God.

While religion, well it mainly just gets in the way. Now as Christians we know that there's another kind of freedom. And it's the kind that's found in service.

Since we see that in Jesus, perfect freedom and perfect obedience come together even as he goes to the cross.

[2 : 43] And while we know this truth, we often and so very easily come up with our own more, shall we say, baptized forms of spiritual but not religious.

The fancy word for that is antinomianism. If you can pronounce that, you get ten bucks.

Antinomianism means a disregard for the law.

Where does it turn up? Well, wherever I decide that God's rules don't apply to me in this particular instance. Now this will feel and look like a form of freedom, but in the end it will be a form of bondage, won't it?

With a look at Ezra 9 this morning, I want us to think about bondage, this bondage as a form of spiritual captivity in fact, or exile if you like.

And then ask how our gospel reading speaks to its remedy. So as we come to the last part of Ezra, and well done, staying with the study of Ezra and Nehemiah together.

[3 : 50] What have we seen so far? A quick rehash, but let's jump into and let's identify with God's people in that time. What's our story up till now?

Well, to start it's a story of a new beginning. Because we've been reminded how God used even a pagan king, Cyrus, to make a way for us, his people, to come to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. In his mind, Cyrus' mind, we were to rebuild a temple. To whom? Well, to the God who lives here in Jerusalem. That is a God who's more or less confined to this space, this territory.

It was all part of Cyrus' program for resettling foreign gods. This was his big thing, which he probably established to show how enlightened and tolerant he was in comparison with the Babylonians who ruled before him.

But never mind. We've been learning that God can bend these quirky human agendas so that they can suit his purposes. Continuing on.

[4 : 55] Once in Jerusalem, we're in chapter 3 there, we enjoyed a great moment of celebration as we saw the temple's foundation laid. And as a priest and Levites, and we're thinking of the coronation and all the pomp and circumstance that goes with it, all the trumpets and the cymbals and great shouts of praise and even tears of thanksgiving are all part of this celebration as that foundation stone is laid.

But then came opposition to our temple rebuilding project, chapter 4. It began when we informed those who just came up and wanted to help us build, and we said, well, that's not going to work for us.

This was their request. Look, we've been in the land after you folks went into exile. Well, we've been worshiping God all along and now think it would be a great idea if we teamed up and we lent a hand with your building.

But remembering Deuteronomy 7, we said no. How God had told us not to form alliances with peoples of the land that he was giving us. Well, for some reason, they didn't like that.

And in fact, they got really angry and managed through various means to put an end to the temple rebuilding project.

[6 : 18] That wasn't the last word because God spoke to our leaders, telling them it's time now to get the job started again. And then, just like he did with Cyrus, very similarly, he worked in Darius' heart to get him to favor us so that we could resume the task.

Finally, the temple is rebuilt. And again, we celebrated. This time, it was the Passover with great joy and thanksgiving. And by this time, it wasn't just us former exiles who celebrated because our number now included some who had, in chapter 6 and verse 21, had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land and they had joined us in celebration. Very important. So what happened next? Well, you've seen a pattern. God moves. A work gets done.

We give thanks and we celebrate. Fourth, there's opposition. And that's exactly what happened again. But this time, the problem wasn't coming to us from out there, but it was coming from within our own ranks.

And what was that problem? Well, in short, it was disobedience. Knowing God's law full well, we chose to disregard it and said nothing when some of our men took for themselves from among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites.

[8 : 00] They took to themselves wives from among those peoples. And as I said, we knew God's law full well, as set forth in the Torah, because we recalled it when the offer was made to help with building.

We knew that God had said we were a people holy unto the Lord, set apart. We also knew that he commanded us not to intermarry with the peoples of the land he was giving over to us.

But maybe, just maybe, in this case, since we got the first part right, maybe there'd be some wiggle room on the second part.

We thought maybe it wouldn't apply to us in every detail, that intermarriage thing. But that's not at all how Ezra saw it. The teacher God had just sent, and he understood.

He understood the matter. He knew that to disregard one part was to disregard the whole. He knew, as one who had, in chapter 7 and verse 10 said, he had set his heart to the study of God's law.

[9 : 12] He knew that we couldn't do such things without putting ourselves, really, in God's place. So that's why when he heard the news, he, remember, we just read, he tore his garment and his cloak.

He pulled hair from his head and his beard, symbolic of mourning. He was deeply troubled. Deeply troubled. He knew that this was the very sort of thing that had landed us in exile before.

And that was, in fact, our condition now, I want to suggest, because we're once again, spiritually speaking, in exile. God has brought us back to Zion.

He's granted us a new beginning. And yet, now we're behaving as this good thing from God. Weren't so good after all. As if we were still in captivity.

Well, the good news is that through Ezra's ministry among us, God brought us to a place of repentance. Ezra prayed, and in that prayer, he reminded us of two things.

[10 : 19] This is, incidentally, justification for prayers that contain many sermons. I think. It used to bug me a little bit sometimes that prayers might contain announcements and such.

But here we have a prayer that is both addressing God, but also reminding us of, well, here of two things. Of the severity of our disobedience.

God doesn't need to know how severe our disobedience is, right? But here we hear it again.

Because in verse 6, we see, our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. Secondly, he reminds us, Ezra, of the consequences of our disobedience.

And he says in verse 7, for our iniquities, we, our kings, our priests, all those who stand out in front of us and lead us, have been given into the hand of the kings of the land to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame.

As it is today. And in that prayer, Ezra also helps us to recall two things. God's great deeds in bringing us back to Zion and God's commands.

[11 : 34] And with that, he asks God for mercy. He says, O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just. We are left as a remnant that has escaped as it is today.

And behold, we're before you in our guilt. For none can stand before you because of this. In verse 15 in chapter 9, which we read. And God granted us repentance and a new start yet again as the men who had married pagan wives had put them away.

As we read there in chapter 10. If you look ahead. Part 2. We've understood something of God's story almost exactly 2,500 years ago.

But is it ours today? That's the question for this Part 2. Is it our story today? Well, it might seem to us today that it's not.

It might seem that way. Because three kind of troubling questions emerge out of this reading. The first, well, if we back up to chapter 4, if we remember that God can use a pagan king to get us back to Zion to rebuild the temple, well, why can he not use the help of semi-pagan peoples to help us rebuild it?

[13 : 01] Well, we'll answer that in a second. 2, this business of banning intermarriages. Sounds xenophobic, doesn't it?

Or, to put it more sharply, when we read in verse 2, that the holy race or seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the land. Isn't that racist?

Isn't that what we call racism today? And then thirdly, this business of, well, once the foreign wives have been taken, is it, do two wrongs make a right?

Does putting them away fix the problem? Does that not tear up the marriage? Tear up the family, even? Well, the questions might boil down to this.

Why the need for such a strict rule when it came to mixing with the peoples of the land? Can it really apply to us today? And that's where we must not rest on the surface of the reading and we must look deeper.

[14 : 06] On the matter of alliances, yes, in principle, God could use the labor of these peoples of the land had He commanded it.

And that's the key. But He hadn't. These were peoples who at best had blended true worship with inventions of their own and God had expressly commanded His people not to associate with them. In fact, not only not to associate but not to be merciful to them. Sounds harsh. But to form any political alliance would have meant to compromise their faith and their worship.

They would have been swallowed up. On the matter of intermarriage, the issue here is not about bloodlines or race in our modern sense because, well, why?

Well, there's already some cultural mixing going on as peoples come and they're grafted into the covenant family. Some we saw in chapter 6 are already worshiping along with us returned exiles.

[15 : 11] So, that, that, the question of race and bloodline is not the issue. So, what is the significance of the ban then?

Well, that had everything to do with another kind of mixing, a mixing of lies with truth, blending of worship of the living God with what verse 1 says, abominations.

It's precisely in light of God's command to come out and be separate that Paul says in 1st, I beg your pardon, 2nd Corinthians 6, 14, he expresses that rule that applies to his people of all times and places.

Do not be, we've heard it, unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what, says Paul, for what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?

If you want a bit of an image or an example of what, of what that looks like when this mixing happens, well, in Judges 3, we read about the spiritual compromise that happened through

precisely this kind of intermarriage.

[16:23] God's people slowly but surely began to worship the statues of Baal and Asherah, the fertility God, mainly, and his consort.

If you spend any time in predominantly non-Christian lands, India, many other places, you know what this feels like palpably, what this honoring and reverencing and worship of invented gods looks like.

Finally, on the matter of dividing up families, well, certainly, divorce, in God's eyes, is wrong. Malachi 2 and 6 but what we see here is God permitting the lesser of two evils.

One commentary puts it well when it says that there was not only a past transgression to remedy but also a future blessing to safeguard through the purification of the community of God.

Now, in interpreting passages like Ezra 9, clearly we have and in our Christian past deliberately twisted God's command regarding separation, promoting at times real forms of racism and it's a sad history but when the separation message is understood as the text intends, I think we get a sense of how directly Ezra 9 applies to us today.

[17:57] Now, originally I thought it might be helpful to try to speak to the questions of interfaith marriage today perhaps or even from there to the full assault on marriage itself that's part of our culture, of our Western culture, but because of time and because I think there's an even more basic problem, I thought I would invite you to reflect with me on the way we sometimes allow lies to get mixed with truth when it comes to the practice or the discipline of knowing God.

The practice or the discipline of knowing God. We've learned, we've heard the word yoke this morning as used by Paul. He was referring of course to the coupling of two animals to accomplish a specific task to give us a picture of how, in this case negatively, we can't follow the patterns of the world for long and not be drawn into the assumptions that govern those patterns.

Jesus, of course, used the image positively when he said in Matthew 11, come to me, take my yoke upon you and learn of me. As I expect, some of you know the Sanskrit word for yoking is yoga. which, taken in its full philosophical context, promotes a particular vision or understanding of union with God.

God's providence through some years spent in India and through some sustained conversations with Christians who practice yoga in a sustained way, I've had to make up my mind.

[19:53] I couldn't leave it as an issue. We'll look at that at a later date. I can't speak of the postures or the breathing exercises themselves.

That is, by themselves, in the abstract, more or less detached from the Hindu philosophy, with which, at some stage, they are bound up.

Because I assume that at some stage, at least, of the discipline of yoga, very, very popular and common throughout India at least, becomes a yoking with assumptions about how we know God at some stage.

The partial truth in the practice of yoga, of course, is that we were made to know God. That, as Augustine said, our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him.

And even in living in India, this passion among Hindus that I would meet and talk to, this passion to be liberated from this endless cycle of death and rebirth, that even, isn't it a kind of bridge for us where we can speak of that message in Ecclesiastes about how there is nothing new under the sun and this desire to break out, to break free from what seems like a meaningless cycle.

[21:21] Well, the heart of the problem, all that said, the proper discipline of yoga, and I would add there, practices of so-called centering prayer.

I don't know if you've investigated those at all, but when you start looking at some of the details, they teach us to look for God where? Well, in this eternal now, by which we're to understand, in a sense, beyond history, or if not there, beyond history, apart from history, bypassing history even, in the depths of our souls.

And there's the heart of the problem, because knowledge of God in that case is not based on what he's done. It's not based on what he's promised. It can't be, because the past and the future are distractions.

They're unreal. They're illusions. What's real is my yoking with God, my yoga, that's already a reality that I just need to cultivate and to fan into flame through the right disciplines.

And so, in the end, I never really know my condition, my real human condition, my alienation from God because of sin, and not knowing that, I'm bound to get the remedy wrong.

[22 : 46] And that's, I think, where the enduring validity of God's command to come out and be separate is clear. For a world that assumes that God's favor must be earned through our own efforts, separation is only going to look like, well, a form of arrogance.

And that's why our testimony is simple. We say with Paul, as he says to Titus in chapter 3, 5 to 7, but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Savior. So we're talking about new beginnings that come from God's rich storehouse. We're talking about a set of partners that's accepted with joy and with thanksgiving.

And because the pattern remains the same, right from the day we left the garden until the day we come into that celestial city, we're talking about a proneness to wander into spiritual captivity.

And that brings us to the message of the gospel this morning. Part three of three. Thanks for staying with me.

[24 : 11] We have a dilemma and a challenge before us. We know how gracious God is calling us back to himself. When it comes to Christian obedience, we also know that we can only ascend God's holy hill because there's one who's already gone ahead of us.

And that's the king of glory, Psalm 24, who's mighty in battle and who's gone ahead. It's Jesus himself. So what's the key to remaining on the path with him?

How do we keep from wandering into spiritual captivity? If that's your question, as I hope it is this morning, what Jesus has to say to his disciples and to us in the gospel is truly good news.

We're talking here about the wonder and I would even say the beauty of how God's will relates to the human will. This is one of those things that has us perplexed and I'm not here to resolve it all neatly, but I do want to say this.

It's not a matter of God putting in his 90% or even his 99.99% while we do the rest. It's not like that at all. I say this because we often get the priority of God's grace right, saying that God has done this great thing for us, but then we make it sound like well, we take over from there, more or less completing what was left to be done.

[25 : 40] And so we claim part ownership of that title deed of our salvation. And here you might ask, well, since we're in John's gospel, why then does Jesus say to his disciples in 14:15, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments?

Or why does he say, if you keep my commandments, you'll abide in my love, 15:10. Isn't this about doing our part? What's the answer?

Well, it is. In a way, as long as our part is also 100%. And that's the mystery of it. God's work is 100% so that our response of obedience can also be 100%.

It's the only way it works. That's God's math in the plan of redemption. And by his design, a divine work in me doesn't make me less human, it makes me more.

So, if you hear what Jesus says about abiding in him in John 15, 3 to 5, see if you hear some of that mystery, some of what I've just tried to articulate in my stumbling way.

[27 : 00] Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And here's what I think we can gather. The priority and power of the word is not something we see only at the beginning of the saving relationship.

relationship. It's there from start to finish because Jesus says apart from me you can do nothing.

And he gives us a picture of how his will and ours come together but without being confused.

One collapsed into the other. He says abide in me and I in you. And there's the key. As we remain in him, as we remain in him, and it's our remaining, we find that we've been doing that by his power all along.

[28 : 19] We're back to the question of true freedom. The freedom that keeps us looking up to Zion, upward to Zion as we sing in some of those old songs and it works like this. Well, we're freed for it by Christ.

As Paul said to the Galatians as I read earlier, for freedom Christ has set us free. And he recognizes the paradox there. Because he says, stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

The point is this, when Christ frees us, he frees us to obey freely. Not as slaves. So if we're talking about a new beginning, and then it's a beginning that's ever new, ever renewing, if you like, by the promised spirit who works within us and in the world.

And that brings us to John 16. I just want to share a couple of thoughts in John 16. What's the situation there with Jesus and his disciples?

Well, it turns out that they're sad. And this, in spite of Jesus' promises, just declared earlier. For instance, he has promised that he will grant to them whatever they ask in his name.

[29 : 39] John 14.13. He has promised them fullness of joy as they abide in him. John 15.11. But as we read in 16.6, Jesus says, because I have said these things, sorrow has filled your heart.

What are these things now? Well, Jesus has also been speaking about leaving them, even though he's promised something else, to prepare a place for them when he does that.

And part of leaving means, though, that the ruler of the world is coming. 14.30. And that they'll be hated by the world and persecuted on account of their separation from it.

15.18 and following. Now, I think we have to assume that at least some of the thoughts that fill the disciples' mind are these. Really, what you're saying, Jesus, is that our situation really is not going to be all that different once you leave than from what it was before.

We'll be back in full captivity once the master is gone. We won't have his words to abide in. Well, because he'll be gone.

[30 : 57] But we read on. And as we do, we learn that Jesus is going away is for their benefit. And in what specific ways it's going to be for their benefit?

In verse 7, Jesus says, I tell you the truth, it's to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you.

But if I go, I will send him to you. Now, again, if we are thinking of the Spirit as maybe some kind of impersonal force, as something less, some entity that's less than the third person of the Trinity, who is Lord and giver of life, we won't be able to grasp Jesus' words, it's to your advantage.

The fact is the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. We were in Galatians, here in Galatians 4, 6. It's clear that the Spirit is the Spirit of or from Jesus.

To know the Spirit is to know the Son, therefore. If we have the Spirit, the Son's presence is not diminished. It's the real presence of the ascended Lord, mediated by the Spirit.

[32 : 16] Word and Spirit are never confused, but neither are we to think of them as working independently. And with that, we see how good is the good news Jesus gives to His disciples.

It has two promises. First, He says that they don't need to worry about the challenge that they'll face in the world. They might be concerned, but they don't need to worry about the persecution that's going to face them.

He says to them in verses 8 to 11 that when the Holy Spirit comes, He's going to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. And for each of these, Jesus, notice, He gives the reason. Concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me. Concerning righteousness, because I'm going to the Father and you will see Me no longer concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

And I think here what we see, I won't unpack each of those, what we see is the Holy Spirit going ahead of them, convicting people of sin, impressing on them the true nature of righteousness, and warning them of the consequences of sin.

[33 : 27] And for this, the disciples then, and disciples today, can rejoice and not worry, knowing that as we go to the nations, Christ is on the throne, and His kingdom will have no end.

And the second, in the second place, Jesus turns from what worries them about what's out there in the world, to what troubles them about their own identity as disciples.

And He promises that His word will remain. Most immediately, He promises that by His Spirit working in them, they will recall what He has taught them, as well as the things that are yet to happen, so that they can record them for future generations.

As for disciples to come, like us, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit's purpose in all this is to bring glory not to Himself, but to point us to Jesus.

Let's hear what Jesus says in verses 12 to 15 again. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears, He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come.

[34 : 51] He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine. Therefore, I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you.

So let me conclude with a basic challenge that we face. In a word, it's that challenge of being in the world, but not of it.

When we yoke ourselves to the world's assumptions about what is good and right and lovely, well, we become gradually absorbed, don't we?

Even without noticing it. We find ourselves forgetting to pray that basic Christian prayer, Come Lord Jesus. Because our hopes and habits are really not those of a pilgrim people who have their hearts and their eyes fixed on the promised land.

But, as we abide in Christ and His word abides in us, we experience that called-outness that is our identity as the church of God. It's a state of being set apart by God that is not there for its own sake.

[36 : 04] God doesn't just set us apart, just to set us apart, right? There's a purpose in His election, in His calling of us. It's a set-apartness to display, to challenge, and to serve as a testimony to all those whom God is calling by His Spirit into communion with Himself.

I thought it's fitting to end with that stanza from that wonderful hymn Keith and Christian Getty wrote. And I'll just end with it as a prayer.

It's the last stanza of Speak, O Lord. Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds. Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us, truths unchanged from the dawn of time that will echo down through eternity.

And by grace we'll stand on Your promises, and by faith we'll walk as You walk with us. Speak, O Lord, till Your church is built, and the earth is filled with Your grace.