

The God Who Restores

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 0 0] Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, would you pour out afresh your Holy Spirit upon us, that spirit that searches the deep things of you, and would you reveal to us deep things about yourself, we ask, and heal all the nooks and crannies of our hearts and minds and lives.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. You may be seated. Let me add my welcome to Aaron. My name is Jordan.

I assist this guy, which is a lot of fun, as you can probably tell. If you don't know me already, please introduce yourself to me after the service.

I would love to meet you. Now, I must warn you from the very beginning here, this sermon is going to be a bit content rich. Because what, in order to understand this passage, and I think for the weight of it to kind of settle in our hearts and minds, I think I'm going to have to bring us all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2, and then take us all the way forward to Revelation 21 and 22.

I have a friend who told me that the first time he ever preached, he decided he was going to preach a 45-minute sermon on the whole Bible. And he said he failed horribly.

[1 : 2 4] And he would never do it again. Well, friends, I haven't learned from his mistake. So, I'm going to give it a go. We'll see how this goes. So, this is what I'm proposing. We're going to start off with Ezekiel 36.

We're going to reach all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2. We're going to re-center in Ezekiel 36. And then we're going to reach forward all the way to Revelation 21 and 22.

And we'll see what happens. So, here we go. Just so you know, at the beginning here, the purpose of this thing is for us to slow down in the midst of the busyness of this season and once again have God show us the big picture in which we live.

So, open your Bibles. Ezekiel 36. We're going to begin by going straight to the heart of tonight's passage. Straight to the heart. Verses 8 and 9. But you, O mountains of Israel.

Pause button right there. O mountains of Israel. Notice how this whole passage, God is speaking a word of hope and restoration, not to the people of Israel, but to the mountains of Israel, to the land of Israel.

[2 : 3 9] We see this more clearly in verse 4. Scan your eyes up. Therefore, O mountains of Israel. Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills, the ravines and the valleys, the desolate places and the deserted cities, which have become prey and derision to the rest of the nations all around.

God is talking to land. It's a bit weird. Verse 8. But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home.

For behold, I am for you and I will turn to you and you shall be tilled and sown. God is speaking to land, to the mountains of Israel.

And he is saying, I am for you. I will turn to you. Why? Why is God so concerned about mountains? Why is God so concerned about the land?

I mean, that's the obvious question. This text just jumps right off the page of the text. Why? I think there's two reasons. The first is quite obvious.

[4 : 00] I think it's because God loves his creation. He loves the mountains and the hills and the ravines. I think that's the implication of verse 9. I am for you and I will turn to you.

God loves his creation. Yes, God loves people. Yes, the story of the Bible is a story of God making and redeeming humanity, a people for himself.

But here we see that God loves his creation too. And he wants to redeem all of it. That's the first reason. But the second reason is a bit more subtle, but I would argue absolutely essential for understanding this passage.

It's simply this. God wants to make a home for his people. That's what we see in verse 8. You shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel.

And what is the reason? What is the purpose that God gives? Here it is. For or because they will soon come home. In other words, what God is doing when he redeems his creation is simply this.

[5 : 11] He is making a home for his people. A home. And that, my friends, I think is the crux of the whole passage.

I think that's it right there. And I think this taps into one of the deepest longings and desires of the human soul.

Does it not? We want to be home. We long for a place of security and belonging and rest and intimacy. We long for home.

And especially during this Advent and Christmas season, home seems to be the center of so much of our activity and energy, does it not? If you're able and you're a student or something, you go home to visit your family.

Or you decorate your home to symbolize that something special is going on. Or you gather in your friends' homes for a special Christmas meal or party. You go to your relatives' home to exchange gifts and fellowship together.

[6 : 18] Or you take time off from work to stay at home. There's a sense in this season, more than almost any time of the year, where home is absolutely central. I think this is no mistake.

Humans long for home. I don't think it's a random evolutionary mistake or an arbitrary fact of human psychology. I think this is God-ingrained desire in us.

From the very beginning of creation, God wove into the fabric of the human heart and mind a longing for home. We were never meant to be people just kind of disembodied and isolated and floating in the clouds.

We were meant to be people in a particular place. Creatures made for home. And the great story of the Bible is that from beginning to end, God has this great home-making impulse and tendency.

In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, God makes a home for humanity. And then in Revelation 21 and 22, God makes a new home for humanity. In Genesis 1 and 2, God puts humanity in the home.

[7 : 29] And in Revelation 21 and 22, God puts humanity in a new home. And so what we're going to do is we're going to look at this biblical picture from one home to another.

And we're going to explore God's great home-making tendency. Open your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1. Get ready for this.

Genesis chapter 1, for those of you that don't know, that's on page 1. In any Bible you have. God puts humanity in a very physical, very real, very concrete place.

What we see in Genesis 1 is in all the days of creation leading up to the creation of humanity, God is making a home that has everything humanity needs to flourish. And then in verse 27, we see God putting humanity in that home.

Look at verse 27 through 29. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them.

[8 : 37] And God blessed them. Notice that. We hear of God blessing. God doesn't need to create. God creates freely because he wants to bless.

Verse 28. And God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply. Remember those words. Be fruitful and multiply. They show up in Ezekiel 36 when we get there. And fill the earth and subdue it.

And have dominion over the fish of the sea. And over the birds of the heavens. And over every living thing that moves on earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of the earth.

And every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. There's this sense in which God puts humanity in a home and says, Look, I've given you everything you need to survive and flourish.

You can have it. You can have it all. And it's good. It's a picture of abundance. God's people. God's people in God's place under God's blessing.

[9 : 47] And if you flip forward to Genesis chapter 2, The picture changes a bit, but the point stays the same. God puts humanity in a garden paradise where they can flourish.

But here, the particular emphasis is on a set of relationships. God has put humanity in a paradise where they're supposed to be in relationship with God, in relationship with one another, and then in relationship to the rest of the creation.

So, Genesis 1, home is a particular place. And in Genesis chapter 2, home is a set of relationships. With God and with people and with creation.

And all of it is essential to flourishing. Genesis chapter 3. This paradisaal bliss doesn't last very long. Humanity's honeymoon is pretty short.

Genesis 3, humanity quickly doubts God's goodness. Doesn't think God really wants to bless them. So they decide life would be better without God, and they choose autonomy and rebellion and self-rule.

[10 : 53] And what we see happening in Genesis chapter 3 is, as humanity chooses to be their own God and seek autonomy, there is a breakdown and a brokenness in all the good relationships that God created in Genesis 1 and 2.

So, look at verses 17 and 18 with me. Genesis chapter 3. Humanity experiences curse in their relationship with God. Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree, listening to the voice of the wife, she listened to the serpent.

So it's really listening to the serpent, the devil. Verse 17. Of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.

Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. Work will be painful and sometimes fruitless.

Look at verses 23 to 24 now. Humanity not only experiences curse, but is exiled from that home. Verse 23. Therefore, the Lord God sent him out from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

[12 : 10] He drove out the man. And at the east of the Garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Humanity is kicked out of the garden. So home is ruined and paradise is lost. And now humanity is living in exile and curse, longing for what once was.

Longing for true life. And this is an absolutely devastating picture of alienation and pain. And the effects of this alienation and pain, this homelessness, have been felt all throughout human history.

But the good news is, is that God doesn't want that to be the case anymore. Flip forward to Genesis chapter 12. God, as always, is determined to bless his creation.

I love Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. If any of you know me, you know I go to this in almost any conversation I have. Look at this.

[13 : 19] Genesis chapter 12. Now the Lord said to Abraham, or Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house, here it is, to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation. And here it is. I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.

And all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Isn't it interesting that the very first promise God makes in his covenant with Abraham, which is the foundational covenant pretty much of the whole Bible, is to bring Abraham to a land where he will then bless them.

Think Garden of Eden once again. God wants to take his people back to a land where they will know flourishing. So God is determined to give his people a new home.

And if you read the story of the Old Testament, what you recognize right away is that the whole story of the Old Testament picks up on God journeying his people toward that promised land.

[14 : 29] So if you read Exodus, if you read Numbers, if you read Deuteronomy, if you read Joshua, it is all about God bringing his people to this particular home.

And that, I think, is the key to understanding Ezekiel chapter 36. Flip back to Ezekiel chapter 36. Remember the context.

God has exiled his people out of their homeland because of their sin and idolatry. Think Genesis 3. Their homeland has been devastated, decimated, desolated.

I don't even know if that's a word. And the people of Israel are in exile, and they're wondering if there's any hope left. Has God given up on his covenant promises?

Has their home been lost forever? It's very painful when home becomes a broken or lost place, right? And this is not a pain that's just unique to Israel's experience.

[15 : 37] This is a pain that people all around the world know and that we know ourselves, especially during this Christmas and Advent season. Home can be a very painful place.

There are millions of people around the world who are physically homeless and have nowhere to live. Many who are physically displaced from their homes and they cannot go back because it's far, it's too far, too expensive, or too hostile.

And there are many people who are relationally homeless as well. Their homes are not safe and secure places. There's too much pain and brokenness associated with home.

Maybe it's fractured by anger and resentment in relationships. Maybe it's sickness or the death of a loved one. Home is just not what it used to be. Maybe it's the pain of division and broken relationships.

Or maybe home is meant to be this place of all this intimacy, and yet home is the place where you feel the most homeless because it's lonely and there's no sense of belonging.

[16 : 48] There are millions more people around the world who are spiritually homeless. They have all the physical and relational blessings of the world, and yet they are isolated from their God because their hearts are restlessly looking for a home in every which direction, yet their hearts have not found rest in God yet.

And it is this sort of darkness that the Israelites were experiencing in their exile. They were experiencing physical and relational and spiritual homelessness.

And it's no doubt that they were asking the same exact questions that many of you and many of your friends and many around the world will ask this Christmas season, will I ever have a home again? Will my home ever be healed and put back together?

Will I ever experience the place of human flourishing and intimacy and belonging and God's blessing and love? In Ezekiel 36, God encourages and reassures His homeless people in the midst of their doubt and despair.

He talks to the land and lets them listen in on it. And in so doing, He declares that He is committed to creating a new home for His people.

[18 : 05] And He's going to do everything it takes to do that. Ezekiel 36, verses 1 to 7. God deals with all the enemies that destroy home.

Look at verse 5. Thus says the Lord God, Surely I have spoken in my hot jealousy against the rest of the nations and against all Edom, who gave my land to themselves as a possession with wholehearted joy and utter contempt that they might make its pasture lands a prey.

Skip to the second half of verse 6. Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I have spoken in my hot, in my jealous wrath because you have suffered the reproach of the nations.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer reproach. God is saying, I'm going to judge the nations.

They're going to reap what they sow. They're going to receive what they inflicted because they destroyed your land. They destroyed home. And notice how the language of jealousy shows up twice.

[19 : 13] Jealousy. Anytime in the Bible when jealousy is mentioned, God is being pictured as a loving husband who is angry at anything that gets in the way of his relationship with his bride, with his good creation.

And so what this passage is telling us is that the reason why God judges is because of the intensity of his love for his creation. And then in verses 8 and 9, God restores the land to fruitfulness.

You shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people for they will soon come home. I am for you and I will turn to you and you shall be tilled and sown.

God is like a divine gardener. And then in verses 10 and 11, God repopulates the land of his people. He repopulates it.

Look at verse 10. And I will multiply. Think back to Genesis 1. Be fruitful and multiply. I will multiply people on you and the whole house of Israel, all of it.

[20 : 22] The city shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt. And I will multiply on you man and beast and they shall multiply and be fruitful. And I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times.

And here it is. I will do more good to you than ever before. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Do you notice all that be fruitful and multiply language?

It comes straight from Genesis chapter 1 and 2. So what's being envisioned here is God is saying I'm actually going to make a new paradise just like Genesis 1 and 2 as your home.

But notice the end of verse 11. God doesn't just say he's going to make a new paradise like what was before. He says, I'm going to raise the bar. End of verse 11. I will do more good to you than ever before.

It's as if God is saying yes, this will be like the Garden of Eden. Yes, it will be like the Promised Land. But this is going to be like something you've never seen before.

[21 : 30] It's going to be way, way greater than that. It's as if God is saying is that he's going to bless his creation and his people in a way that they have never experienced up to this point before.

He's going to do something radically new. And friends, I hope you feel the weight of this promise in your own lives because God wants to say the same thing to you and me tonight.

He wants to speak straight into the ruined and devastated and desolated places of our life and he wants to say I'm not just going to take you back to what it was before. I'm going to do such a profound work of grace that you're going to know something way better than what you knew before.

That's what he wants to do. We've seen how central the land is to God's people. We've seen how central it is in the Old Testament.

God is a divine homemaker. And so when we come to the New Testament we come with eager anticipation and great expectation. How is God going to do this?

[22 : 38] How is he going to do it? And it only takes about two seconds to be quickly bewildered and even disappointed with the New Testament because the New Testament almost never mentions land.

It never talks about the land of Israel throughout the whole New Testament. It's so surprising. Something that was absolutely central to the Old Testament seems to just drop off the face of the earth in the New Testament.

And as Christians we ask ourselves well what do we do with these promises in Ezekiel chapter 36? How do we understand them? How do we make sense of this? Because God doesn't turn his back on his promises.

What I want to suggest is that we need with some of the promises of the Old Testament to wear two lenses at once. We need to put on a pair of glasses but a pair of bifocal glasses.

Bifocal. You guys know what those are? Bifocal glasses? They're those big glasses normally that are pretty sweet. And through the top you can kind of see the distant horizon and then if you look at the bottom with the little glass it magnifies what is close and right in front of you and you can see it there.

[23 : 54] And what I want to suggest is that when we look at this passage in light of the New Testament we get a dual fulfillment. If we look through those bottom lenses we see a fulfillment that is really near and close to us.

And then if we look through those top lenses we see a fulfillment that is a bit more distant but no less real. So we're going to start with the near fulfillment. I know it's a weird analogy but bear with me.

The near fulfillment is this. God has fulfilled his promises to the land in the person of Jesus Christ. Person of Jesus Christ who is very near to us by the Holy Spirit.

This is a present spiritual fulfillment. Now in order to understand this we have to remember what the land was in the Old Testament. Hang with me guys.

I know this is hard work. You have to remember what the land was in the Old Testament. It was the place where God wanted to bring his people where they would experience human flourishing and his covenantal blessing and intimacy.

[25 : 01] So the land in the Old Testament was absolutely essential to the relationship between God and his people. And what the New Testament I think tells us is that that centrality of the land is actually fulfilled by Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Why? Because when Jesus Christ was born into the world he was born into the world to be in exile homeless like we are. In fact Jesus Christ took the curse of exile and homelessness on himself in the cross so that we would no longer have to be alienated from God.

So that he could actually bring us home into the presence of God so that in the person of Jesus Christ we could know human flourishing and relationship and God's blessing in covenant.

So now Jesus Christ is the place where God's people experience God's blessing and God's intimacy. Not a geopolitical territory but a flesh and blood person.

I think this is part of what Paul was on about when he said in Ephesians chapter 1 blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[26 : 28] Every spiritual blessing in Christ. And one of the main blessings that Paul goes on and talks about is the blessing of being adopted into God's family. So it's like God has brought us into his spiritual home.

So what the people were expecting in the land we now have in Jesus Christ. Relationship and blessing and intimacy with the living God.

Now you're probably asking yourself why in the world do I care? What does this mean? I think it means a couple things. I think it means comfort for us.

Friends, think about this for a second. God came to make his home among us in the person of Jesus Christ so that through him we could experience intimacy with God.

We no longer have to be spiritual exiles. We can get to know the living God. Jesus Christ has become our spiritual home. So it's him who is our refuge and our rock when the storms of life get strong.

[27 : 37] It's Jesus who is our protector and provider when things seem uncertain in the future. It's Jesus Christ who is our friend and our companion when we are lonely along the way.

It's Jesus Christ who is our brother and our comforter when we are afflicted and grieved by the pains of his life. It's Jesus Christ who is our Lord and our Redeemer when we are in bondage and sin and decay.

It is Jesus Christ who is our Alpha and our Omega when we are gripped by fear and anxiety. It is Jesus Christ who is our inheritance and our desire and our love and our treasure and our joy because in him we have found our true home now.

Jesus Christ is everything we could have ever imagined anything we could have ever wanted and so much more. When Ezekiel 36 God said I will do more good to you than ever before.

He meant Jesus Christ. I will do more good to you in him than you could possibly fathom. And so we are comforted that Jesus is with us.

[28 : 53] Second thing is I think this actually speaks a word of challenge to us especially for those of us here at St. John's and in Vancouver. we may have lots of blessings lots of physical blessings.

We may have lots of blessings of family even even though that's broken. But there's a real tendency for us in this place to get caught up in the chaos of the gifts of the meals of the consumerism of everything that home is about except for the person of Jesus Christ.

Christ. And we are challenged in this passage to find our true home in him and in him alone. So brothers and sisters I want to beg with you do not waste the next few weeks of your life thinking that home is everything else except for Jesus Christ.

Don't waste it. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36. That's the nearness.

I'm finishing up here so last two minutes. The distant fulfillment so if you look at the top of your bifocals it's distant but it's no less real no less important.

[30 : 15] God will fulfill his promises in the future new creation. This is great. There's only one major difference.

In Ezekiel chapter 36 God spoke to a little place in ancient Middle East about this big on a map. And in Revelation 21 and 22 God expands that promises so that it covers the whole cosmos.

Nothing in the universe is left untouched by the goodness of God. His restoring and healing touch extends as far as the universe that he created.

I will do more good to you than ever before he says and this is part of the more good what we see in Revelation chapter 21. Turn there because it's too good not to read it.

Revelation 21 verse 1 this is our hope friends then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more the sea is death and chaos and evil and I saw the holy city new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place or you could say the home of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away and he who was seated on the throne said behold

[32 : 23] I am making all things new from Genesis to Revelation God is the great homemaker and he longs for you to be home to be home in Christ and one day to be home in the new creation he does not want you or any part of his creation to experience the devastation and the alienation that sin and evil wreak havoc in our lives he will redeem he will remake he will restore he will do what he promised to do and he will make a home for his people but that's not the best part the best part is what we see here is that God makes his home with us and that's why the apostle says no eye has seen and no ear has heard and no heart can fully know what God has prepared for those who love him in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

Amen