

# Renewal Returns with Joy

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[0:00] Okay, so this past Wednesday was of course Remembrance Day and I was happy to be able to celebrate in the ceremony down at, I'm already forgetting the name, I'm still trying to remember the names of all the places here in Squamish.

There you go, that place, that place. So that's where I was and I was way in the back so I couldn't really see anything but I really appreciated the service. And it being Remembrance Day, when I got on my computer next and I checked on Facebook, I saw that one of my friends had shared one of these videos that is sort of this compilation of video clips of soldiers coming home to their families and surprising their families.

So one of these like 15 minute compilations which is just clip after clip of soldiers coming home to their families and people being very surprised and yelling and screaming and crying and that sort of thing.

And the title of the video was something along the lines of, I challenge you to watch this without crying, right? And so I said challenge accepted. And I started watching and I think I made it about 1 minute 30 seconds in.

And if you've ever watched those, you know what I mean, right? I don't know what it is about those. And that's what I was trying to think about this week. Why is it such a universal experience that we're overwhelmed by that sort of thing?

[1:28] How do these clips, why are they so universally moving even to people like me who I don't have a family member in the military and yet I myself am just overwhelmed by the emotion in those clips and by that experience?

And I was thinking about this as I was preparing today's sermon on Ezra chapter 6. So I was thinking, I had in mind this week this concept of the Lord returning his people from exile, the Lord returning his people to complete the rebuilding of his temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

And I was reminded of Psalm 126, written about that experience, which begins with these lines. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. And in that psalm, the line that caught me this particular week was that second line.

We were like those who dream. There's that old saying, pinch me, I must be dreaming, right? When something unexpectedly good happens, it must be a dream.

[2:43] I had a dream on Thursday night where something unexpectedly bad happened, where I got a credit card bill and there were \$5,000 in expenses that I didn't expect. And I was so surprised, even in my dream, I was so surprised that I woke myself up, right?

And I thought, did that really happen? And I thought, no, it was just a dream to go back to sleep and deal with it in the morning. But in our dreams, things happen that surprise us. Things don't seem real.

We were like those who dream. What is happening is utterly unexpected and doesn't seem like this could really take place in the real world, in real life.

And I think that's one thing that those soldier homecoming videos tap into is the utterly unexpected thing that takes place. Because these family members, put yourself in their shoes, they have resigned themselves to being separated from their father, from their brother, from their husband, their son.

And then he appears in front of them, just like that, as if in a dream. And these folks, they've spent months, maybe even over a year, carefully, they've been guarding their hearts, been carefully guarding their emotions.

[ 3 : 57 ] They've been trying to protect themselves from sorrow, protect themselves from being overwhelmed. And in a moment, all of those walls just fall down. They're knocked to the ground. And all that's left in that moment is pure, uninhibited joy.

And it's joy because the one they love is now with them. The one they love is unexpectedly present with them.

And so joy often comes from the unexpected presence of one that you love. And so it is for people, the people of Israel, in the book of Ezra.

Because they've spent many decades, they've spent decades in exile in the land of Babylon. And I think it's so important to put ourselves in their shoes, to put ourselves, try to feel what they're feeling.

Because the commentator, as the commentator Henry Cowles writes about their situation, he says, In the lapse of 70 years in exile, the hope of restoration to their land, so long deferred, so long put off, had mostly gone out in despair.

[ 5 : 12 ] Save, as it rested in some minds, on their faith in God's promise. The policy of those great powers in the east had long been settled. Namely, to break up the old tribes and kingdoms of western Asia, take the people into far eastern countries, and never let them return.

If you were carried off into exile by Assyria, or by its successor kingdom Babylon, that meant you were going off into exile, you were going to a far away country, you were never, ever, ever coming back.

Your future prospects are to remain in a distant land forever, and eventually you're just going to have to settle, make it your home, give up, lose your national identity, lose your identity as God's people, maybe ultimately lose your faith in the one true God.

This is exactly what happened to many other nations before them. They got moved, they lost their identity, they were no longer the people they once were. But as we learned in Ezra chapter 1, the Lord did something new in history at this point, something that the world had never seen before.

And what he did is he raised up a new leader from a tribal people that up to this time was very obscure, from the people of Persia, and this man was a man named Cyrus.

[ 6 : 37 ] And he just bursts onto the world scene, out of nowhere. And he conquers the Babylonian Empire, he takes it over and establishes a new empire, the Empire of Persia, and he reverses what was a centuries-old policy of bringing people into exile, and moving them, and erasing their identity.

And what Cyrus does is he returns many of their nations to their lands. And so for the Israelites, he instructed them, those Israelites who were exiled from the land of Judah, to go back, to return to the city of Jerusalem, and to rebuild the temple of the Lord.

This was so unexpected and unprecedented in all history until the Lord used Cyrus to accomplish this. And this temple they're rebuilding, this is the place where God was present with his people in a unique way.

The temple was the place where God met with his people. It was the marker of his presence among them. It was the center of their worship as they centered their life, their society, their culture around the Lord their God.

And so it should be no wonder that they return to Jerusalem in joy, like those who dream. Because the Lord had gone against all expectations.

[ 7 : 58 ] He'd gone against all of the pattern of history up to that point, and he was renewing them. He was making them new again, giving them new life and new hope. He was returning them to their land, establishing his presence among them.

Renewal begins with God. And we saw them at this point then, working together to begin the building of the temple. In Ezra chapter 3, we saw that renewal was a community project.

And then, they encountered opposition from the people around them. Renewal breeds resistance. They were discouraged by hard economic times as well, until the Lord sent his prophets to encourage them to re-center themselves on the Lord their God, rather than their own wealth and their own circumstances.

The Lord sent his prophets to encourage them. And then last week, we saw that the governor of their province, this Persian governor, saw what they were doing, building the temple, and he wasn't sure if this was legal or not.

And so what he did was he sent a message to the new Persian king, to the king named Darius, to question whether or not the original king Cyrus, whether or not he had authorized this temple.

[ 9 : 18 ] And so that brings us to Ezra chapter 6. And this is really important. This is critical. All of salvation history rests on this point. You and I would not be here if what happens is Darius goes, looks for this decree, and can't find it.

If they look through the archives and they cannot locate Cyrus' old decree, they're going to go back and say, stop the building of the temple. Don't let it be rebuilt.

And then what happens to the people of Israel? Well, they lose their identity. They lose their place of worship. They lose this marker, this indicator of the presence of the Lord.

And probably we never have this continuing people of Israel and ultimately never have Jesus of Nazareth. But what's beautiful is that God is working through history to make his will happen, to make it take place.

Here's what happens in Ezra chapter 6. Turn with me to the book of Ezra, about a third of the way through your Bibles. If you don't have a copy of the Bible, please just raise your hand. One of our ushers will be happy to provide you with a copy of Scripture.

[ 10 : 21 ] We're going to need it to follow along with the word of the Lord this morning. So we're in Ezra, the book of Ezra, chapter 6, and I'll read through the chapter here from the English Standard Version.

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. And in Ecbatana, the capital that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written.

A record. In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem. Let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained.

Its height shall be 60 cubits, and its breadth 60 cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. And also, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem, and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place.

You shall put them in the house of God. Now, therefore, Tatnai, governor of the province beyond the river, Shethar Bozanai, and your associates, the governors who are in the province beyond the river, keep away.

[ 11 : 45 ] Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God.

The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from beyond the river. And whatever is needed, bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil as the priests at Jerusalem require, let that be given to them day by day without fail that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

Also, and this is kind of my favorite verse in the chapter, also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a dunghill.

Maybe we'll preach another sermon on that verse sometime. It was a different world. It just shows these guys weren't the nicest guys, right? So when they, if they were to say don't rebuild the temple, this is what was going to, this is the kind of thing that would happen if you disobeyed them. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem.

[ 13 : 14 ] I, Darius, make a decree. Let it be done with all diligence. It does not get more emphatic than that, does it?

Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tatnai, the governor of the province beyond the river, Shetharbozani and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.

And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Ido. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the returned exiles celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

They offered at the dedication of this house of God a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs and as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

[ 14 : 24 ] And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions for the service of God at Jerusalem as it is written in the book of Moses. On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the Passover for the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together.

All of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles for their fellow priests and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord the God of Israel.

And they kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them so that he aided them in the work of the house of God the God of Israel.

This is the word of the Lord. So this here the end of chapter 6 is kind of the end of act 1 in Ezra. It's the end of the first part of the book of Ezra and the first part of Ezra ends with celebration. It ends with festivals. It ends with joyful worship.

[ 15 : 43 ] Verse 16 The people of Israel the priests and the Levites and the rest of the returned exiles celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. Verse 22 They kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy for the Lord had made them joyful.

When you have that same word joy three times in a row in such a short span you know this is important. You know this is a central and defining theme of this passage of scripture.

So why were they rejoicing? That's the question we've got to have. People don't just wake up in the morning super excited and joyful for no reason at all. At least I don't. Maybe you do. But in verse 22 we see why.

Why? The Lord had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them so that he aided them in the work of the house of God the God of Israel.

That was the reason for joy. They were celebrating with joyful worship because God had done the work to rebuild his house to rebuild the temple. God had renewed his presence among them.

[ 16 : 57 ] And so we see here that God renews his people by granting them joyful worship in his presence. God renews his people by granting them joyful worship in his presence.

So as for us let's take some time here to consider why we should join the people of Israel separated by time and space why we should join them in joyful worship to the one true God.

What we can learn from Ezra 6 it's this concept of joy it's described really well I think by the commentator Mervyn Brennenman and he writes many motives are given for rejoicing but the chief reason is God himself.

Joy comes from the deep consciousness of God's presence in relation to God's actions. I love that last sentence there. Joy comes from the deep consciousness of God's presence in relation to God's actions.

In a way joy is it comes from awareness. An awareness or a consciousness that God is here God is with us God is present and that he is acting. We're going to find in Ezra 6 that this chapter we review several of the themes we've been learning from the book of Ezra about the presence of the Lord and the activity of the Lord.

[ 18 : 18 ] And so let's go over them again. Let's look at what it's like for God to be present with us to act on our behalf. And it's been my prayer that as we do this we open our hearts to the Lord.

That this wouldn't simply fall on people who are like yeah yeah good Bible lesson like it's some sort of lesson that we've heard before. That we would open our hearts to take joy in what God is doing. Not only what he did in the past for the people of Israel but what he is doing in our church and in our lives right here and right now. How he is working to renew us. Because God renews his people by granting them joyful worship in his presence.

That's how he renews you. That's how he renews me. We learned from Ezra chapter 1 that renewal begins with God. So that's the first reason for joy.

First let's rejoice because it is God who begins the work of renewal. It's God who begins the work of renewal. And we see it happen here again in chapter 6 because thanks to Darius' decree not only are the Israelites given permission to rebuild the temple far more than that they are given all of the resources they could possibly want to rebuild the temple and to sacrifice to the Lord to worship as God had instructed them.

[ 19 : 36 ] We see in verse 14 that there is someone behind the scenes working behind the scenes to move this renewal forward. Verse 14 The elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Ido.

They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia. So through his prophets and through the work of these Persian rulers that he had brought to power God is the one initiating the work.

He is the one working behind the scenes. And God is doing it for the joy of his people. God is doing it to restore his presence among his people so that he can renew them by granting them joyful worship in his presence.

Let's pause for a moment. Let's think of the implications for our lives. Do you ever feel like God isn't really doing very much?

some of you I know have experienced the work of the Lord this past week but I am I feel pretty confident saying there's some of you in this room who kind of feel like you're wondering what is the Lord doing?

[ 21 : 03 ] Is he really active in my life? Is he active in my family's life? Is he really doing anything? It feels like he is not present. It feels like he's absent that he's distant that I go to him in prayer sometimes to call for his attention and I'm just hoping he'll react that he'll do something.

But what we see here is that I think our problem is primarily one of awareness one of consciousness because in Ezra 6 we see that God is not a distant and reluctant God and remember God is the same yesterday and today and forever.

The God of the people of Israel back then is the same God we worship today. He is not a distant and reluctant God. He is governing all of the events of history all the way from the rise and fall of empires to the falling of hairs from your head.

God governs it all. He is an active God and he is eager to show his presence among us. It's not as though we are coming to God hoping he will hear us.

He is coming to us. He wants to be present among us. God is the one who begins the work of renewal.

[ 22 : 25 ] In 1 Peter chapter 2 the apostle Peter writes about our active initiating God and he writes these words in chapter 2 as you come to him that's Jesus Christ as you come to him a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.

You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house that's a temple to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ for it stands in scripture behold I am laying in Zion a stone a cornerstone chosen and precious and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

who is the cornerstone chosen and precious who is the cornerstone of this temple that God is building who is the cornerstone of this great temple that the temple in Ezra was simply a shadow of simply pointing towards the new and great temple has as its cornerstone Jesus of Nazareth he is God's anointed king he is the Messiah he is the son of God and he is the one that is chosen and precious he is chosen by God as the one man who stands for all he is the one man who stands for all who believe in him all who have turned from their sin turned away from their rebellion against God and believed that Jesus Christ is God's way the one mediator between God and man the only way to salvation the only way to be reconciled with God Jesus Christ stands for us all he is our high priest we see here the priests mediating between

God and between God's people but Jesus Christ is the great high priest who stands for us before God who sacrificed not a hundred bulls two hundred rams four hundred lambs and twelve male goats he sacrificed his own body and he shed his own blood for our sin for our rebellion against God so that we would be reconciled to him that our sins were punished on the cross Jesus Christ took it all he paid it all so that we would be forgiven and we would be reconciled and all of this was God's initiative God started it it was his idea God chose you God chose me to be like living stones built on this cornerstone built on Jesus Christ so that with Jesus Christ we are the new temple we are the new temple of God that's you

God has initiated all of this work and so that's our first reason for joy let's rejoice because it is God who begins the work of renewal second let's rejoice because it is God who overcomes opposition to renewal let's rejoice because it is God who overcomes opposition to renewal and we saw in Ezra chapter 4 that some of the people groups who are living in the land with the Israelites they wanted to stifle God's renewing work they wanted to put a stop to it they wanted to limit the influence of the people of Israel and they managed to slow down the renewing work it kind of ground to a halt for a period of time for a number of years but it was not stopped and here we see a potential threat to the work in Ezra chapter 6 because even though this governor this man named Tatna he isn't hostile to the Israelites as far as we can tell but he has the power to halt this construction at once this whole being impaled and this whole making someone's house a dunghill they really had the power to do that there was no such thing as cruel and unusual punishment in the Persian Empire they could have put a stop to it at once if Cyrus' decree isn't found so you can imagine that the Israelites imagine that they're waiting to hear back from King Darius they're waiting and worrying for weeks or even months about whether they are going to be stopped from doing this work but the opposition from their neighbors and this potential opposition from their rulers it does not stop the renewing work it doesn't stop it and I would even argue that this opposition far from stopping it it becomes a means to renewal in and of itself that God takes this thing that was meant for evil and he uses it for good because what this did is it forced the people to turn to the Lord in faith we saw that they continued the work of building even while they were waiting for the decree from Darius they kept working and building because they were trusting that the Lord would protect them and that the Lord would provide for them and this forced them to trust

[ 27 : 48 ] God that he was present with them that he was working for them and on their behalf and ultimately if it were not for this opposition we would not have the books of Haggai Zechariah and large portions of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in our Bibles we today thousands of years later are blessed because there was opposition to renewal and God overcame it renewal might breed resistance but this very resistance is often the means that God uses to continue his renewing work among us God renews his people by granting them joyful worship in his presence as they see him overcome in our journey class that meets at 9 a.m.

before the service we've been talking about that we've been talking about when heat comes into our lives when difficulties hardship suffering comes into our lives that these are often the means these bad things are used by God for good because they are the means that God uses to open our eyes to the sin in our hearts to our mindsets that are turned away from the Lord and to turn away from that and to start trusting him and believing in him and taking advantage of all the resources he's given to us in Christ Jesus let's consider this we face in our lives you and I face individuals who are making efforts to undermine the renewing work that God is doing in our church in our families in us as individuals Peter in 1 Peter 2 he comments that there is resistance to God and his work he writes so the honor is for you who believe but for those who do not believe the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense they stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do we see that opposition is going to come from those who oppose

Jesus Christ who reject his claim to be the one true way to the father the cornerstone the cornerstone on which God's people is built but when opposition to Jesus comes when opposition to God's renewing work in your life and in the life of your church comes do you respond by turning away from God in discouragement do you respond by kind of turning inward in self-pity in defeat and just trying to block this out trying to cope with it or do you turn towards God do you turn towards God do you long for his presence do you seek to trust him and learn from him in other words you respond to the heat of your lives not with thorns but with fruit one of these roads is the path to cynicism and to despair the other road is the path to joy and life and renewal

God will rescue his people from opposition and that's a cause for joy let's rejoice because it is God who overcomes opposition to renewal because it is God who has set us apart as his people it is God who has set us apart as his people and we see the people of God very clearly defined in Ezra chapter 6 verses 20 and 21 the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together all of them were clean so they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles for their fellow priests and for themselves it was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord the God of Israel so we have here a Passover celebration and this was

something that was commanded in the law of Moses what the Passover was was this was a celebration of a defining moment in the nation of Israel a defining moment moment in their history a moment that God rescued them out of slavery

God led them on an exodus out of Egypt and that's very telling they've been just led on a second exodus out of Babylon but on this first exodus God first called them his people and he called them his people out of Egypt to serve as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that's the way he described them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and so the Passover was something that was to be celebrated by God's people alone as his unique possession and those who wanted to celebrate it had to identify themselves with God's people in Exodus chapter 12 this is what they're commanded if a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord let all his males be circumcised then he may come near and keep it he shall be as a native of the land but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it so what that meant was at this time in salvation history before Christ came any foreigner who wanted to keep the Passover was invited to do so this was an inclusive invitation they said come we do want you to worship the Lord with us we do want you to celebrate the Passover with us regardless of your ethnicity regardless of your upbringing regardless of the baggage from your old life come worship the Lord but you need to identify yourself as one of God's people so before

[ 33 : 55 ] Christ came and fulfilled the law of Moses what foreigners had to do is their males had to be circumcised before they could come worship there were clear boundaries between who was one of God's people and who wasn't one of God's people and in Ezra chapter 6 verse 21 we notice that those who are celebrating the Passover and it's not clear whether these are Jewish people who maybe escaped the exile who stayed in the land and were now joining those who returned from exile it's not clear whether maybe they're Gentile people who happen to live in the land and are now identifying themselves with the people of Israel whoever they are they are clearly choosing to do so they are identifying themselves as God's people by separating themselves from the other people of the land during this festival rather than participating in the ceremonially unclean rituals and rhythms of life of the people of the land rather than violating the Sabbath commandment they've been given they had said look we're going to celebrate the Passover by identifying ourselves with the way of life of God's people with the rhythms of life that are carried out by the people of

God worshipping God centering their lives on God what they're saying is our primary allegiance is not to the people that we came out of our primary allegiance is to our new family God's family God's people and that is the overwhelming overarching allegiance that controls our life and this is a cause not for awkwardness not for trying to apologize for that this is a cause for joy this is a cause for celebration and joy because what this means is that despite any expectation they had why should they ever think the Lord would invite them to worship him in that day and age your God was the God of your people their God was the God of their people but now the God of this people is saying join us come over worship me this is a cause for joy because despite all of their expectations the Lord God of Israel has invited them to worship him and he has chosen to be present among them God renews his people by granting them joyful worship in his presence and so it is with us so it is with you and me Peter continues in 1st Peter chapter 2 but you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light once you were not a people but now you are God's people once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy beloved I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and glorify

God on the day of visitation so what this means is that you and I have a new identity we have been called out of the darkness and the confusion of a world that does not know God that tries to hide from his holiness that tries to pretend that our rebellion against him is good and right and that we can live the way that we want to but we have turned from that God has chosen us and pulled us out of that and he's made us a new people our new identity sojourners and exiles the people of Israel living in the land of Babylon in a foreign land where they don't belong and longing to return to God's country that's us that's you and me but we've been separated out to be a people for his own possession and God has done this to proclaim his excellencies to proclaim how excellent and worthy of worship he is to proclaim how he is the true source of joy and happiness and we are to keep our conduct honorable so that those who don't believe they may recognize that we obey and

we worship and we enjoy a good

God and that when he returns they will recognize clearly his glory for some of them that may be a time of great sorrow a time of weeping when they realize the glory of the one true God but for those who have turned away from their sins and believed in Jesus Christ it will be a time of great joy let's rejoice because it is God who has set us apart as his people doing so and to the doing so He's along He's King He's not but he's in his finger