

Renewal Begins with God

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Date: 18 October 2015

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- [0 : 00] Okay, well this coming week is something I've been looking forward to quite for quite a while. This is some sort of a big event on our calendar that I'm I'm excited about.
- And the reason is because this coming week is when a huge shipment of yard signs from the election arrives in our nation's landfills. You know, we're I'm pretty excited about that.
- And, you know, I mean all facetiousness aside, it's very valuable, it's important for us as citizens to go out and vote. But there's something about election rhetoric that kind of rubs me the wrong way a lot of times.
- And one of these things that I've noticed being part of both American and Canadian election campaigns watching them is there's this, there's this idea that's often sometimes stated outright sometimes unstated that our nation once was great.
- We enjoyed a period of greatness, a golden age. And now the political party in power has ruined everything. They've tarnished our reputation around the world.
- [1 : 12] They've ruined our economy. We're all suffering miserably because of the party in power. And you valued citizen have the power to change that by voting for me. This is something that it doesn't matter what political party, it seems like every election, the party that's out of power has this sort of narrative behind their campaign.
- And it latches on to our genuine desire for renewal, which is a good thing because not only on a national level, but at the level of our community, at the level of our church, and even in our families, and for us as individuals, we want renewal to take place.
- Specifically, those of us who are Christians, we recognize that we ourselves, our families, our church, we're just not what we should be. Oftentimes, our first love has been lost.
- A lot of times, we've lost sight of the mission that God has given us. And we want to see God at work again. We want to see God at work reviving, renewing His people. We want to see our church come alive again with joy, with passion.
- We want to see people changed by the Holy Spirit as they take to heart the good news of Jesus Christ and live a life that has been transformed by the Holy Spirit.
- [2 : 29] We want to see a spirit of gratitude, generosity take root among God's people. We want renewal. We long for renewal. And that's a good desire.
- That's a good desire to have. We want the same thing that God wants because God wants renewal among us too. And that's why we're beginning a sermon series on the Old Testament book of Ezra.
- And this sermon series is about God's people being renewed. Maybe our microphone needs to be renewed too. I don't know.
- What's this? What's this? Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay.
- Okay.
- [4 : 18] Okay.
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He's not the main actor. He's not the main mover of events. The main figure who moves events, who revitalizes the people of God, is God himself.

He is the one who moves among his people. 2,600 years ago, and these events are recorded to show us that God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him.

God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him. What he's doing is he's drawing them back to worship. He's drawing them back.

[5 : 58] Done with us. Maybe the Lord has turned his back on us. He's divorced us. And maybe we're just doomed to simply disappear as a people.

But even before they were sent into exile, even before Babylon came, the prophet Jeremiah had given them this promise from the Lord.

And it's recorded in Jeremiah chapter 29. In Jeremiah 29, we read, For thus says the Lord, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you.

And I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans for welfare and not for evil. To give you a future and a hope.

Then you will call upon me and pray to me. And I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord.

[7 : 00] And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord. And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This is a promise of renewal. This is a promise of new life. This is a promise of a return to the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised his people. And this is a promise that the exiles have been hanging on to for 70 years.

Now, it's easy for us to look back 2,600 years later and to just kind of see all this and think, Oh, yeah, well, of course, you know, God keeps his promises. And, of course, they were going to go back into land. Duh. Well, you know, when you're going through it, when you're, you know, when you're year 60, and all the older folks who do remember the land, the land of Israel are all dying off, there are very few left, when there seems to be no hope of ever returning to the land, when it seems you're going, that God has simply rejected you, he's no longer taking care of you, you're all alone in this and you're in exile, it's easy to believe that this is never going to happen.

You're never going to go home. But as improbable as it must have seemed, the Lord did keep his promise. He was faithful to keep his promise. And what the Lord did, the way he accomplished that was, he accomplished this through yet another regional superpower, rising, rising to power.

So a man named Cyrus became king of the Persians and the Medes, and they invaded the land of Babylon and conquered the Babylonians. And through this pagan king named Cyrus, God began the process of renewing his people.

[8 : 46] And that brings us to Ezra chapter one. So this introduces us to the story of renewal. Ezra chapter one. Ezra is about yay far into your Bibles, about a third of the way through in the Old Testament.

We'll be reading verses one through four to start with. Ezra chapter one reads, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him and 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.

And let each survivor in whatever place he sojourns be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

[10 : 02] Now this is quite a proclamation, but let's make no mistake here. I know Cyrus says that he calls the Lord the God of heaven. He says the Lord has given him all the kingdoms of the earth. We need to be clear though, Cyrus is actually not a worshiper.

He is not a follower of the Lord. We see this in other passages of scripture, in Isaiah for example, and we see that also from archaeology, because archaeologists have uncovered similar proclamations that Cyrus made about other gods.

Cyrus did this for many other nations. This was part of his policy, to resettle people in their lands. His idea was, well, if I return them to their lands and have them set up worship, maybe those gods will give me favor too.

That's the way Cyrus was thinking. So from a human perspective, this doesn't really seem like the Lord is working. This seems simply like it's just all political process, that this is something that can simply be explained by political and military motives.

So it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that renewal of God's people takes place purely by human initiative. But the author of this book lets us peek behind the curtain, because in verse 1 he writes this, The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia.

[11 : 23] Cyrus, his entire reign, the entire reason he was raised to power, is simply that he would serve as an unknowing instrument in the hands of the Lord. Cyrus thinks that he is the one in control, he is the one in power, he is the one who is supreme, but in fact it is the Lord who is behind the scenes.

It is the Lord stirring up his heart to send the people of Israel back to their homeland, to rebuild his temple of worship. God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him.

It is God taking the initiative. And God is powerful enough to compel, to direct one of the most powerful men on the earth to do his will.

And what's even more amazing is not only is he able to direct one single man to do his will, he's powerful enough to do the same for thousands of Israelites scattered across the Persian Empire.

So we pick up the story in verse 5. Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.

[12 : 31] And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithradath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazar, the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them, 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bulls of gold, 410 bulls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels.

All the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. So we see in verse 5 here that the Israelites who returned to the promised land, they're described as everyone whose spirit God has stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.

Everyone whose spirit God had stirred. So once again, renewal begins with God. God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, now he's stirring up the spirit of his people.

He's doing what he's done in the past because hundreds of years before, before God had, before all this had taken place, God had brought his people on an exodus, out of a land of captivity, out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the promised land.

[14 : 01] And now, history is repeating itself. The Lord is doing the same work again. He's stirring up their hearts for a second exodus. Back from the exile, back from this land of captivity to the promised land.

God is bringing them back to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. He's bringing them back to worship. Back to a relationship with him in the land that he has given them.

God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him. Now, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, if you are here this morning as a Christian, then this book, this story, this isn't just simply, simply some sort of obscure history lesson about an ancient Near Eastern tribe.

tribe. This is a story that is, in fact, your family history. This is your family history. Because if you've believed in Jesus Christ, if you've trusted that Jesus Christ died and was raised to life for you, if you trust that he did this so that your sins would be forgiven, that your rebellion against God would be pardoned, that you'd be reconciled to God and renewed with new life, if you've been united with Christ by faith, you are now a part of God's people because you're united with Jesus Christ who is the true Israel, who is everything that Israel was made to be.

And now you are one of God's people too. And so this history is the history of your people. This is your family history. This is your heritage. And the same God that renewed the people of Israel 2,600 years ago, he renews today.

[15 : 46] He renews you. He renews your family. He renews your church. This is our God. And what this tells us is that if you and I want to see renewal happen in our church, if we want to see our church filled with a fresh passion and joy, if we want to see our families and neighbors in town attracted to a new and joyful community of faith, then first we have to recognize this is not something we can force.

This is not something we can bring about there is no program, there is no curriculum, there is no methodology that can make renewal happen.

Those can be the means of renewal, but they are not the engine that drives it. It has to begin with God. It has to begin with God taking us and we're often just stuck in our self-centered, self-absorbed little worlds where we're just thinking about ourselves and our own futures and God backeting us out of that into a God-centered mission, into a life of worship.

God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him. And that leads us to the question of what do these genuine believers look like?

What does it look like when God compels them to renewal? Who are the people that God stirs up to recenter their lives on him in worship?

[17 : 23] What does it look like to be at the epicenter of God's renewing work? Well, if you want to know who these people are, that's why we have Ezra chapter 2.

Now, this is a lengthy list of families, a list of clans who are returning from exile and you're probably sitting here wondering, is he going to read this list? And I was debating it.

So on the one hand, in our culture, lists like this, we don't like them. We straight up do not like lists like this. They are long, they are tedious, they are boring, and they seem irrelevant.

What does this have to do with my life? I think if we were to write the Bible ourselves, we would not include Ezra chapter 2. We would leave that one out.

The fact that God includes it maybe tells us more about ourselves than it does about the people of Israel and about God. I think we'd be missing out on a very good thing that the Lord has in store for us because not only are these God's word for us, not only are they useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

[18 : 37] This list is, it's kind of like a hall of fame, isn't it? This is sort of a hall of fame, a list of heroes who gave up a predictable life in exile. These are people we can look up to.

These are families and clans that we can look to as an example of faith. Because what these people did is they uprooted themselves and their families, they closed the family business, they sold most of their belongings, and while little they had left, they packed up, and they left for a land that the vast majority of them had never seen.

They didn't know what was going to happen to them when they got there. They faced hardship, they faced poverty, and as we're going to learn in the coming weeks, they faced some pretty severe opposition from their enemies, from the people who were in the surrounding lands who didn't want them back.

But as the author of Hebrews put it, these people are desiring a better country. They're desiring God's country. And they're desiring the worship of the Lord to be restored.

So it's only fit that these heroes receive recognition from us. We are going to read Ezra chapter 2. Now as I read this, in your mind, these are not just names and numbers and statistics.

[19 : 55] These are real people. They're people like you. They're people like me. They're people with families. They're people with lives, with businesses. They're people who have physical problems.

They're people with hardships. Old people, young people. And they're traveling a long and dusty road in faith. They are stirred up by the Spirit of God. They are eager to return to their homeland to restore the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem.

So try to visualize faces and families as I read this. Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had carried captive to Babylonia.

They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Saraiah, Realiyah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mizpar, Bigvi, Rehum, and Bana.

We'll see how the name pronunciation goes. The number and the men of the people of Israel, the sons of Parosh, 2,172, the sons of Shephethiah, 372, the sons of Aras, 775, the sons of Peath Moab, namely the sons of Jeshua, and Joab, 2,812, the sons of Elam, 1,254, the sons of Zatu, 945, the sons of Zakkai, 760, the sons of Bani, 642, the sons of Bebi, 623, the sons of Asgad, 1,222, the sons of Adonikam, 666, the sons of Bigvi, 2,056, the sons of Aden, 454, the sons of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, 98, the sons of Bezi, 323, the sons of Jorah, 112, the sons of Hashum, 223, the sons of Gebar, 95, the sons of Bethlehem, 123, the men of Netopha, 56, the men of Anathoth, 128, the sons of Asmaveth, 42, the sons of Kiriatharim,

[21 : 50] Chepherah, and Beoroth, 743, the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621, the men of Mikmas, 122, the men of Bethel and Ai, 223, the sons of Nebo, 52, the sons of Magbish, 156, the sons of the other Elam, not the first one, 1,254, the sons of Harim, 320, the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725, the sons of Jericho, 345, the sons of Sena, 3,630.

He had a lot of them. Okay. The priests, the sons of Jediah, of the house of Jeshua, 973, the sons of Emer, 1052, the sons of Pasher, 1247, the sons of Harim, 1017.

That's a lot of priests. The Levites, the sons of Jeshua and Cadmiel, of the sons of Hadeviah, 74, the singers, the sons of Asaph, 128, the sons of the gatekeepers, the sons of Shalom, the sons of Eter, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akub, the sons of Hatithah, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139.

Here comes my favorite part. The temple servants, the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasufa, the sons of Tabeoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Siahah, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanon, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Hakub, the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shamlai, the sons of Henan, the sons of Gidel, the sons of Gehar, the sons of Reah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nikoda, the sons of Gazam, the sons of Uzzah, the sons of Passiah, the sons of Bessai, the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephysim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakufa, the sons of Harher.

I want to name my firstborn son Harher. The sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Nizai, and the sons of Hatifa.

[23 : 49] It's easy to get lost in all these names. Remember, keep in mind, these are real people, real families. Their names might seem weird to you, but your names will probably seem weird to them too. So these are people not to be forgotten. The sons of Solomon's servants, the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hasophorath, the sons of Peruda, the sons of Jela, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Gidel, the sons of Shephetiah, the sons of Hatil, the sons of Pokareth, Hazabim, and the sons of Ami.

All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. I'm going to stop here just a second because something just struck me about this. We have been talking in our journey class a bit about the need for community, the need that Christ changes people through community. You notice that he's not listing individuals here. He's listing families. He's listing clans. God renews people.

God renews us at a community level. God changes us at a community level. We often think of ourselves as these individuals kind of siloed and separated and wonder, when's God going to change me?

God changes you through the people around you. None of these people did this by themselves. None of these people ventured back to the land on their own. God's work of renewal was a community project, wasn't it? And so it is today.

The following were those who came up from Telmela, Telharsha, Sherub, Adan, and Emer, though they could not prove their father's houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel.

[25 : 24] The sons of Deliah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nicodah, 1662. Also of the sons of the priests, the sons of Habiah, the sons of Hacos, and the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name.

These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

And that's a big deal because this is something the people of Israel struggled before, choosing people to be priests, to be mediators to God that had not been authorized by the Lord.

This is something that the people of God are taking the commandments of the Lord very seriously. This is something that is very different from the track record of Israel up until now. They knew that they could only rely on a particular mediator.

And so it is today. We have a great high priest, a great mediator in Jesus Christ. There is no other way to God. There is no other mediator between God and human beings.

[26 : 31] It is only in Jesus Christ. We have to be very particular about that. God does not work his work of renewal in people who will settle for a mediator other than Jesus Christ.

Verse 64. That's a lot of donkeys.

Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God to erect it on its site. According to their ability, they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 derricks of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priest's garments.

Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns and all the rest of Israel in their towns. Okay. Let's make a few final observations about the genuine believers that God compels to renewal.

So let's make some clear observations here. These are people who are all in. Right? These are people who are all in. They are abandoning everything that the world has to offer in order to see God's people renewed.

[28 : 01] You see, life in Babylon, for some people it wasn't easy. For some people, they were starting to make some good money there. And many people of Israel chose to remain. They did not want to return to the promised land because of the economic hardship, because of the difficulty that they would face.

But these people that God uses for renewal, they are all in. And second, these people are not afraid to commit. They're not afraid to put their names down on a list.

They're not afraid to commit to this mission that God has given to them. I think sometimes we struggle with this. Putting our name, when you put your name, when you write your name down, when you register for something, you're committed.

You're in. There's a record now. You can't just back out, not without consequences. I think considering our sermon on church membership last week, that's a timely reminder that there's a consistent pattern we see, not only in Scripture, but I've witnessed it in practice as well.

The people who God stirs up to renewal are the same people who are willing and eager to put down their names, to commit themselves to the people of God, to be counted as part of a local community of believers.

[29 : 18] Go all in. That's what God is stirring us up to do, I think, is just to be willing to commit, to willing to give ourselves over to his mission, his purpose, his church.

And third, these people are seeking God's kingdom rather than our own. Once again, we really struggled with this in our culture, and we talked about this in our journey class.

Especially as individuals, we do think of our lives in terms of our own life story. I think about, here's how I often default to thinking about my life.

I think about my life with me as an individual siloed off from everybody else. I think about my own life trajectory, the story arc of my life, how I was born, how I grew up as a child.

I went off to school and to college in order to gain an education so I could make a living for myself, hopefully have a family one day. I'm looking forward to growing older, to a comfortable retirement where I can sort of drift off and close out the story in a peaceful manner.

[30 : 30] Here's a problem with that. I am at the center of that story. Remember, if the book of Ezra tells us anything, it's that we are not at the center of the story.

It's God. Your life story is not about you. You are not the main character of the story that God is working through the world. You're just one thread in a tapestry that he is weaving.

If these exiles were to think of their lives in terms of their own life story, their own story, where they are central to it, where they have dreams and goals that they are longing towards, where they define success and failure by whether or not their life story with them at the center turns out the way they wanted, if that's the way they thought, they would never have gone back.

They would never have returned to the promised land. What I find particularly amazing, some of these individuals, and we're going to see this next week especially, some of these individuals are elders and their families.

We're talking people 80, 90 years old. And they're willing to make a long journey of weeks and months on a dangerous road with no promises ahead except possibly hardship and opposition.

[31 : 52] And they abandoned that life that they had in order that God's people would be renewed. Is it possible that God wants you to abandon your own life story to be part of a greater work of renewal here in his church?

Is it possible that it might even be this, that the greatest work that God has in store for you comes maybe in the closing years of your life?

Is it possible that maybe your life up until now, whether you're young or old, has been simply a prelude for the work of renewal that God is going to accomplish in you and through you?

You know, I don't know. I can't claim to know what the future is what the next few years hold for our church. I don't know what God's Spirit is doing.

And I don't know who here is experiencing, maybe you're experiencing the stirring of the Spirit of God in your heart. All I know is God renews his people by compelling genuine believers to worship him.

[32 : 58] Do you sense God working in your heart? Do you sense him stirring you up? Do you sense a growing longing to see people in Squamish come to believe in Jesus Christ and to be reconciled to God?

Do you have an ache to see yourself and to see the people sitting next to you be changed so that they become more like Jesus Christ? Do you look forward to eternal life with Jesus Christ together with his family in a better country, in the world as it will be when Christ returns?

This sort of renewal, it always begins with God. Let's turn to him in prayer now. Let's ask him.