

Our Faithful God

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Matthew, one of the pastors here. It is a joy to gather and it is a joy to bring God's word to you this morning.

WE are going to be in Ezra 1 this morning. That's right! If you are just joining us, it's a great time to jump in. We have just finished our study through the book of 1 Corinthians, and today we are beginning a new series on the books, "Ezra and Nehemiah".

You may have no clue who those two guys are, or what the purpose of the and that's okay.

To some extent we are all there. These aren't books that are commonly preached, or if they are preached they are preached alongside a building campaign, which to be clear, is not happening here at Harvest. We simply want to behold Christ in Ezra and Nehemiah.

What's exciting about preaching books that we are unfamiliar with is that unforeseen treasures in God's Word await us, that a feast full of exotic and wonderful delicacies that we've never tasted, awaits us.

To help us get oriented to the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, here's a few nuggets. It is the last of the OT historical books, documenting the last chapter of God's people before things go dark, which is then followed by the coming of Christ. The span of history that we are talking about covers between 538-433BC.

What's going on? The people of God have rejected God in favor of idolatry, and their punishment been exile. Their land, which was their promised land, given to them by God when they came up out of Egypt, has been destroyed, and they as a people are taken off into captivity by the Babylonians. They're now slaves in a foreign land.

Ezra and Nehemiah are largely two memories, hence the titles of each book, which appear to have been put together by Nehemiah. In the Hebrew Bible these were one book, so that's why we are combining the two. And they detail the faithfulness of God as He leads the people out of exile and restores and rebuilds His people in their Land. If you wanted to paint broad strokes across these two books, essentially Ezra documents the building of the Temple, and in Nehemiah, the building of the city.

Let me ask you a question. How in control does this world feel? War, poverty, sex trafficking, evil is rampant and seemingly unchecked, and life is uncertain. Globally, in the nation, your family, and in your own heart. This may subtly cause us anxiety and fear and to doubt God's existence, or to doubt His goodness and plan.

Is there a God or is this thing spinning out of control?

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, are positioned as a fixed telescope, pointing us to God's covenant faithfulness and His sovereign grace, but also to our responsibility in response to His grace.

This morning we will be in Ezra, chapters 1-2.

In Ezra 1-2 we are going to see God's staggering faithfulness. I want us to look at God's faithfulness from three different angles. We will see that God is faithful to His Word, that God is faithful to His people, and that God is faithful to His mission.

Let's pray.

1. God is faithful to His Word

1:1 “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:”

So what’s going on here?

Cyrus of Persia has just conquered Babylon, and now the WORD of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah is about to be fulfilled. Well, what word did Jeremiah speak?

10 “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”

God’s people had so disobeyed and angered God that He sent them into exile. Sovereign, fatherly discipline going on here. A 70 year timeout. It will be painful and harsh, but God gives this word, that when the 70 years are completed He’s coming to get them and bring them back to this place.

Then comes a popular verse in a not so popular context...

11 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. (He’s saying that on the front end of a 70 year exile... It’s, I know the plans I have for you because it’s about to get hard) 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, declares the LORD, 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.” Jer. 29:10-14

Exile happens by way of the Babylonians, they come in and overtake Israel. Everything they’ve held on to, destroyed. For them, salvation was so intertwined with their land, Exile essentially being the worst possible punishment. 7 decades of slavery and oppression in a foreign land and under a foreign king. That would be like us being in timeout since 1947.

Imagine if you are in their shoes? Morale in the camp can’t be very high. How in the world would we ever get back to our land, much less enjoy Temple worship, their visual reminder that God was with them. Impossible scenario, right? They’re weak, they’re poor, they are under the rule of Cyrus, the most powerful king in the ancient world. We aren’t going any where, God has forgotten us, how could he rescue us even if He wanted to. I wonder if that was some of their thoughts. They may have even been despairing.

But God is faithful to His Word. He will make a way where there is no way. What’s impossible to man is possible for God.

How does God fulfill His word, It says **“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:**

2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 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. 4 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.”

So God flexes His power here 1. Stirring up the pagan Cyrus (not a follower of Yahweh). Cyrus was no where near acknowledging the Lord. There’s an inscription of a quote from him, “I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon.” -Oh really?

Proverbs 21:1, **“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” OR Daniel 2:21, It is God who puts down one king and raises up another.**

God on a dime stirs up the heart of Cyrus to not only acknowledge God's supremacy, but to lead the charge in getting God's people back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. Cyrus is merely a pawn in God's hand.

J. G. McConville explains that “behind this opening verse ... lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation.”

The conversation about God's faithfulness to His Word must lead us into a conversation about God's sovereign ability to BE faithful. It's not just that God is faithful to His Word, it's that He has the power to pull it off. When I leave in the morning and kiss all my girls goodbye, tell them I love them, and I'll be back after work, I don't have the power to pull that off, I'm making that statement in faith, I'm not sovereign.

But God is, and If God were not sovereign, His word is emptied of power and emptied of relevance and meaning. We can't rest on it or anchor ourselves in it.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah in how God ties His sovereignty and His Word together..

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: “I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited,’ and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins’; who says to the deep, ‘Be dry; I will dry up your rivers’; who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’” -Isaiah 44:24-28 (Isaiah 200 years before)

It's like God is intentionally backing His Word to them with sovereign language. Just telling them that He's going to do something isn't enough. That's like us too, we need guarantees. That's why we have contracts, its the guarantee something will be done. God's guarantee is that He is sovereign! I'm going to bless you beyond your wildest dreams, and when things get tough and seem out of control, I want you to look up at the stars. See those? I put those there, by myself, I didn't need anyone to help me with that. When you doubt what I am capable of, look up!

Let's see this continue to play out... back to Ezra 1:5

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. 6 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. 7 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. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Cyrus leads this whole charge, and even funds it!

Church, when God says that He's going to do something, He's going to do it.

application

And maybe this morning you have found yourself in a similar situation as the exiles. You are looking out at all the global systems at work, and see unchecked evil at work. Maybe you yourself are feeling a bit in exile. some situation that just seems too far gone. There's no way God could be faithful to His word. You are tired of holding on. When God determines to do something, nothing, absolutely nothing, can stand in His way.

God orders all of history. God is powerful. We need to grasp the power of God here. We need to be freshly shocked and comforted with God's sovereign power. We aren't floating around aimlessly in this universe. This universe is headed somewhere, and it's never skipping a beat or taking a wrong turn.

For believers, God's sovereignty is not something to be scared of, it's something to find strength in, comfort in, rest in.

Who needs to give up some control today? Whose carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders today, and needs to give it up? I'm not saying be lazy, but I'm saying what are you ultimately trusting, your ability to run the universe, or God's?

God is faithful to His people

2:1 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.

In this little verse there is a wealth of grace that I want us to see. Much of what I want to say to this point is really looking at the same story with a different lens, seeing how this Word is connected to blessing God's people. The Word that God is faithful to is a Word of blessing to His people. It's where sovereignty and love meet. Sovereignty can be scary, but that's only when it's divorced with love. I want us to see now how God's Word and His faithfulness to His Word also means faithfulness to His people.

Chapter 2 begins with a summary statement of what has happened. These were the people who were carried away in captivity, have been exiles, and they have now returned.

Again, let's dive into some of the background here to get what is going on...

Jer. 32:37 Behold, I will gather them (Jews) from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation.

God's people had been in blatant, rebellious sin and idolatry. They have basically rejected God and don't want anything to do with him anymore. They had become faithless. That's when God rises up and says, enough, you are going to be disciplined. But then abundant grace is poured out, listen as God continues to speak through Jeremiah...

37 I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. 38 And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 39 I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. 40 I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. 41 I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

42 "For thus says the LORD: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them. ... for I will restore their fortunes, declares the LORD."” Jeremiah 32:36-44

God is completely restoring and blessing His people, beyond their wildest dreams. You've got to get this. These people were in wicked, wicked, high-handed sin against God. God had every right to wipe them off the

face of the earth. What is so breathtaking about this picture is that God's people are being restored and it's God that's doing it.

If it was me, I'd say, how dare you act like that. Go into exile and think about everything that you have said and done to me, and when you are ready to change your attitude, when you've had a heart change, then you can come back.

That's not what God does. There is no heart change. There hasn't even been an opportunity for the heart change to happen. There's no repentance or obedience that compels God to go get them.

God goes to get them because God loves them. Because God is gracious. The gospel is shining here. They are enslaved in captivity and in their own sin, too weak and powerless to get themselves out. And in comes God.

Not only is God bringing them out to their land, but He is saying, they shall be my people and I will be their God (that is huge!)... He's giving them a new heart that would desire God and choose obedience. And making an everlasting covenant with them, to never turn away from doing good to them.

An everlasting unbreakable covenant to never stop doing good to them. It can't get any better than that. That's not fair, is it? They didn't earn that! God says that's the whole point, I'm putting my grace on display, my faithfulness to a faithless people. That's grace.

Rom 5. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

It wasn't when we got cleaned up! Christ was exiled out of the Land so that we exiles may enter back in the Land.

God also causes us to obey. We saw that in v.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."

God stirred their hearts to do what God was wanting them to do. I don't know about you, but that gives me hope. If God doesn't stir our wicked hearts, we aren't going to obey him.

God is faithful to His mission

As chapter 2 continues there is a large list of the names of the people that come back from exile to inhabit the land.

But there is something very interesting about this list of people. It begins at the end of v.2 with the number of the men of Israel, there's nothing too unique about that, you'd expect that. But then the next section, v.36 the priests, then v.40, the Levites, then v.43, the temple servants, then v.55 the sons of Solomon's servants (Solomon was the Israelite King who built the 1st Temple).

You can't miss that the real focus of God here is on the Temple. The priests and the Levites were the only ones allowed by God to serve in the temple. Everything is Temple-centric.

And the question is why? Why is God so concerned with this Temple? To answer that we have to zoom out a little. Here's the OT story line as it relates to the Temple in 2 minutes.

We should think of the Temple as the meeting place between God and man. And In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and put man in a garden. The language used by Moses parallels for the garden parallels a lot of temple language. So we are to see that in the beginning man dwelled with God in this temple-

like garden. Sin happens, man is kicked out of the temple-garden into the wilderness, or to put it another way, into exile.

God determines, though, to bless all of humanity, to redeem and restore them back to His original design. This, you could say, is God's mission, to bless humanity. To bring humanity back from exile, back from the wilderness, into the garden of His presence.

What stands in the way between God and His ability to bless man is man's sin, and therefore we also see at the very beginning, that the temple was both the meeting place between God and man, but also the place where sacrifice for sin was made. There is sacrifice in the garden, Adam and Eve's clothes had to come from an animal sacrifice.

God calls Abraham and says, I will bless you and you will be a blessing to all the nations. So God's strategy to bless the world is to do it through the people of Abraham.]. We see more prototypes for the temple when God rescues His people from Egypt. First in The tent of Meeting, then later the Tabernacle, again where God's presence dwelled and sacrifices were made to keep the relationship going. Finally the kingdom is born with King David who purposes to make the Temple in the capital of Jerusalem. Then as we've discussed today, that temple was destroyed and the Israelites exiled.

So why is God concerned with the Temple? Because it's through the temple and the temple sacrifices that God dwells with man.

God, rebuilding the temple, is not just saying He is faithful to the Israelites, it's saying, He's faithful to His global mission to bless all of Humanity. Israel is blessed to be a blessing, and that blessing centers on the fact that God is there.

But listen to this, it goes farther, God determines to bless the nations as the nation Israel walks in obedience. So He's not going to do it without their obedience. And we see God's passionate pursuit of their purity and holiness in v.59.

59 The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, 652. 61 Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). 62 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.

God is being gracious, but that does not mean he is being any less serious about sin. The implication here is that God's people must keep themselves pure and undefiled according to God's commands. This is not about ethnic superiority, it's about obedience to God's plan. God is demonstrating His own holiness and that sin cannot be tolerated. God is passionate for the purity of His people, and it's only in their purity that they will be able to be a blessing to the nations.

We see obedience take root in their lives.

68 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. 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments.

70 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.

God's people are back. Worship is being restored on the earth. God's mission is advancing.

As Jesus says, I am the temple. Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Jesus is the new temple, He is the temple that is both the meeting place between God and man and the sacrifice that makes it possible.

And Jesus ascends to heaven and then sends down His Spirit and fills the church as the temple on earth and sends us out to the ends of the earth, taking God's presence with us and the message of salvation.

“Be still and know that I am God, I will have my glory in all the earth.” That is a missional verse. We don't worry that God's mission is going to be completed.

But here's the deal, as great as this exodus was, God restoring His people in their land, they did not fully arrive in glory, nor were they able to be the blessing to other nations that God had called them to be. Their nation was not strong, and they as a people were weak, and of course, they still had sin in their hearts.

Conclusion

The book of Hebrews makes plain that we are all exiles on earth. We are awaiting the return of our glorious King to come and get us, take us home, to a kingdom that is not of this world. A new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness and peace and gladness will reign forever.

As 1 Peter 1:13 was written, to exiles, the christians, **“set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”**

Church, may we set our hope on God's faithfulness, that grace is here and grace is coming, and may we live our lives in light of that grace, to the glory and honor of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.