

Restoring Part 3

- For the past three weeks, we've been establishing the reality of God's discipline among His people
 - We first contrasted judgment with discipline
 - Judgment was the fate of the tribes in the north who did not receive God's mercy
 - Discipline was God's response for the southern tribes, who God purposed to save
 - And we also saw the lengths that God went to while waiting patiently for their return
 - In how He sent prophets time and time again calling upon the nation to repent
 - And then how God began to act in deliberate ways to teach the nation of Israel a lesson of the importance to follow Him fully
 - When it was time to act, God began by removing the corrupt leadership
 - He used Neb to exact punishment on the southern kingdom of Judah
 - Neb's army comes to Jerusalem three times
 - And in the first time, he removes the king of Israel
 - In fact, he removes the king in each of the three times he subdues the kingdom
 - In the first visit, he also takes the noblemen and educated class
 - Men like Daniel, who formed the highest levels of society in Israel
 - So that new leadership couldn't re-establish itself without Neb approval
 - In the second visit, Neb removes everyone artisan and educator in the city
 - The only men he leaves behind are the poorest

- The city is left without leaders or teachers
 - None who could direct the nation into the wrong sinful practices that had come to mark them up to this point
 - Then, after a final rebellion, Neb sent a third army against the city and utterly destroys it
 - Most notably, he removes the walls and the temple itself
 - Reducing them to their foundations
 - Finally, God's punishment on Israel had resulted in the loss of any opportunity to worship in the temple
- So God's discipline on the nation began as an assault
 - Against false leaders, false teachers, and then false worship
 - Leaving nothing for 70 years, until restoration

[Ezra 1:1](#) ¶ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying:

[Ezra 1:2](#) ¶ "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

[Ezra 1:3](#) 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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.

[Ezra 1:4](#) 'Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

- In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia
 - In other words, there is a new sheriff in town
 - While the Jews are in captivity, the Babylonian empire has given way to the Persian empire
 - And at the appointed time (70 years), God stirs Cyrus to release the Jews

- To show you how through God's planning has been toward Israel, I need to point out a small detail
 - The chronicler says that Cyrus was acting to fulfill the word of the Lord
 - According to Jeremiah 25
 - Jeremiah predicted that the nations captivity would last for 70 years at which time they would return
 - And then it was Isaiah who predicted the rebuilding of the southern kingdom:

[Is. 44:26](#) Confirming the word of His servant
 And performing the purpose of His messengers.
It is I who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited!'
 And of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built.'
 And I will raise up her ruins *again*.

[Is. 44:27](#) "*It is I* who says to the depth of the sea, 'Be dried up!'
 And I will make your rivers dry.

[Is. 44:28](#) "*It is I* who says of Cyrus, '*He is My shepherd!*
 And he will perform all My desire.'
 And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,'
 And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"

[Is. 45:1](#) ¶ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
 Whom I have taken by the right hand,
 To subdue nations before him
 And to loose the loins of kings;
 To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:

- But did you notice that God even predicted who it was who would permit this rebuilding?
 - It was Cyrus of Persian
 - Isaiah mentions this man by name nearly 200 years before he was even born
 - Cyrus sends out a message saying that the Lord had appointed him as ruler of the earth, and he was to build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem
 - This is a pagan ruler of a pagan empire
 - Yet he responds to God with an obedient decree

- Cyrus even uses the traditional Jewish way of reckoning importance
- He says up to Jerusalem
- So often God seems to do this same thing with us
 - When He is determined to get our attention, God may use the world around us to affect his will, including using unbelievers to make his point
 - I think of the policeman who writes us a ticket for speeding
 - Or the stranger who reminds us to pick up the trash we leave behind at our seat in the movies
 - Times like that when we are supposed to be the ones living a Christ-like life and setting the example for others
 - But instead, we slip and fall
 - And then God seems to delight at times in using the obedience of an unbeliever to highlight our mistakes
 - How much more difficult is it for us – or anyone else – to preach the gospel to these observers when their only memory of Christians is one of sin
 - In the case of Cyrus, what did it tell the world that a pagan king was more concerned about following God's commands and decrees than were his own people?
- Turning our attention to the decree itself, God issues the decree in a very interesting way
 - Through Cyrus, God declares that Cyrus is supposed to build His House
 - And that whoever was among the people of God, let him go up to build it
 - This statement is fascinating
 - The king doesn't order anyone to do anything specifically
 - He says may God be with you and let anyone go up to Jerusalem to build the temple

- This is a free invitation
- The decree seeks men and women stirred by God in the same way Cyrus himself was stirred
- God is about to do a work of restoration in the nation of Israel
 - But it's a work that must begin with a desire to hear and follow the Lord
 - We might be tempted to think that this is a forgone conclusion
 - We might assume that anyone who had the opportunity to leave captivity would do it, right?
- When God begins to restore His people from a time of discipline, He opens doors but he doesn't shove
 - He is looking for faithful followers
 - And after 70 years of captivity, He's looking for those who were ready to follow Him
 - So he has Cyrus issue a decree inviting those stirred by God to go up to Jerusalem
- We know later in Ezra's account that only a little less than 50,000 Jews elected to return to Jerusalem
 - And this makes some sense when you consider what it meant to go back
 - First, they were leaving home
 - Second, they were going to a wilderness
 - Nothing there
 - Vulnerable
 - In other words, it was a real test of determination and faith for these Jews to return
 - It's usually the case that when God has brought about discipline, He will ask us to take a step of faith and trust in Him if we are to return to a walk with Him
 - None of these 50K had to leave

- They could have continued to live in Babylon, as many more Jews did
- But if these people had their hearts stirred to go up to Jerusalem
 - In other words, God had placed it on their hearts to respond to His kindness and take this step of faith
 - If you have this calling to return to obedience and you don't, you will continue to feel the call and the pressure to respond
 - We'll see that clearly when we look at Nehemiah
 - Today, some of us may have felt as though we've been through those three steps of discipline
 - We may seen the sting of our disobedience at times past, and now we feel like we're in exile
 - Waiting for God to call us home as it were
 - Has God begun to call for you to return in a more faithful walk
 - Do you feel that tug on the heart?
 - Have you begun to go up as these Jews did?
- Finally, I want to point out what I believe is the most important piece of this call
 - It goes out to everyone but to no one in particular
 - There is no leader appointed
 - No one is directed to gather the Jews and take them home
 - The decree places the responsibility on each person individually to make a decision
 - The heart of each individual is clearly the issue here
 - Remember the first thing to be addressed in God's discipline of His people
 - It was the corrupting and sinful leadership of Israel
 - God systematically destroyed the kings of Israel because they had brought such great apostasy upon the nation

- Now when the time came to bring the nation back into the land, how would you and I supposed God would begin that restoration?
 - We would assume God would begin by raising up a great leader
 - But He doesn't
 - Consider the history of the nation of Israel
 - There was a time once before when the nation was without kings
 - The time of Judges
 - God ruled the people by speaking and ruling through the judges
 - But the people cried out for a king and God permitted Samuel to anoint a king, though He warned them it would lead to much misery
- And of course, God was right
 - Since the people were not content to be ruled by God to follow His decrees faithfully, they turned to kings
 - And these kings failed them
 - Only God is our perfect and righteous King and Judge
- So as He begins to bring the people back to the land, He isn't rushing to place men in positions of leadership over the people
 - His first priority is to establish faithful men and women who will follow God before they ever think about following a man
 - Because if God had replaced their leadership before the people were ready and willing to follow Him personally, then they might never follow God
 - Their loyalties would be with the new king, not God
 - Someday they may again be confronted with unrighteous leadership
 - But if their hearts are true to God, then they will never lose their way

- So the people assemble and prepare for the long trip back to Jerusalem
 - And each is to bring a freewill offering collected from among those who remain behind
 - Because rebuilding the temple is not free
 - I love how God finds provision for his faithful few even from among the many who didn't personally feel the call to return
 - You know, it may be that way for us at times
 - As we retreat from exile and return to where God has called us to be
 - The sacrifice that obedience requires may ultimately be met by a provision that comes from the most unlikely of places
 - Just as we might feel the conviction of the HS brought upon us through the unbelieving world
 - Likewise, God may choose to bless our subsequent obedience by making provision through others who lack the conviction or courage to walk with us
 - Our God is a mighty God, Jehovah Jirah – Provider
- We've heard of revivals in scripture
 - I think you're seeing a revival here
 - The people stirred by God's call
 - And in response to that call, they set their minds and hearts on a difficult walk of faith
 - A walk that demands sacrifice
 - Ultimately, it's a walk toward worship
 - They are returning to rebuild the house of the Lord
 - And the house of the Lord is a place of prayer and worship
 - These are people who feel called to worship God, and the call is so strong in their lives, they are willing to risk everything else

[Ezra 3:1](#) ¶ Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

[Ezra 3:2](#) Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

[Ezra 3:3](#) So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.

[Ezra 3:4](#) They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and *offered* the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;

[Ezra 3:5](#) and afterward *there was* a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.

[Ezra 3:6](#) From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.

- Soon after reaching the land, three men rise to the foreground to organize the people
 - Jeshua, and his brothers, and Zerubbabel, and his brothers
 - These men are mentioned prominently, but yet it is still a group
 - The building committee
 - And they begin the work
 - They set up the simplest of stone altar on what remained of the temple's foundation
 - And even as they worked, they were terrified of the peoples in the land
 - The word means dread
 - What a pitiful scene, isn't it?
 - The group is small
 - It's leaderless
 - It's vulnerable
 - It's in fear from attack

- The setting for worship is crude and completely stripped of anything magnificent or even suitable
 - The only things present are the people themselves, a rough stone altar, and the sky above them
 - Oh, and God Himself
 - And so everything is just as God wanted it
- This is a worship service stripped clean of all the things that might have been mistaken for worship or of God Himself
 - They have been brought back to the heart of worship
- First, they are at the place God appointed
 - They have come to His place on His terms
 - They have built the altar He required
 - And they are without all the trappings of religious practice that men so often come to mistake for true worship
 - They have only a heart to approach Him and bless His name
 - Secondly, they are vulnerable, and completely dependent on God
 - That's not to say that they weren't always 100% dependent on God
 - But these circumstances make that dependence utterly clear
 - It's so easy for all of us to forget that worship is not a once-a-week activity
 - We should worship everyday with our very lives
 - Occasionally, I believe God needs to bring us back to basics so we can understand that worship isn't about what's going on around us
 - It's about what's going on inside of us
 - Example in home church...

- Finally, what is the basis for Judah's new found worship?
 - Where did they go as a community of believers in learning how to worship God
 - To learn of His expectations and seek His will?
 - Verse 2 tells us
 - They did what they did according to the word of God
 - And verses 3 & 4 continue to describe how they observed the things God had prescribed in the Law
 - And they rejoiced in those things
 - So if we are feeling called to return to God in a new and heartfelt way
 - Having experienced His discipline and now ready to follow Him anew
 - Where do we go to learn what that kind of life will look like
 - We go to God's word

[Rom. 12:1](#) ¶ Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.

[Rom. 12:2](#) And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

[Eph. 4:1](#) ¶ Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

[Eph. 4:2](#) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,

[Eph. 4:3](#) being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

- In other words, the worship that defines a true, heartfelt walk with the Lord is not a worship of Sunday mornings attendance
 - Though our attendance in worship is an important element
- And our worship is not faithful practice of rituals or ceremonies

- Though many of these things can be useful to enhance our experience
- And worship is not something performed by musicians and pastors
 - Those our leaders have been raised up by the Lord to encourage our faithfulness
- Worship begins with a heart's response to God's call to walk with Him in a self-sacrificial attitude
 - And to put nothing before Him and His call
 - And to strip away all the barriers and distractions to such a life,
 - Even if we feel vulnerable and helpless and even foolish
 - For then we come to depend on Him and abide in Him
 - And then He can do great things through us
- Just as God is not prepared to do in the life of Judah, having brought them back to the heart of worship