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Research

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Big Idea: Return to what you neglected

Introduction

We're starting a new series today called *Renewal*, where we're taking 4 weeks to study the Old Testament book of Ezra.

We're calling this series "renewal" because that's my prayer for you.

Renewal means to make new again. It's restoring something to its former strength or bringing it back to life. It's rebuilding something that has been neglected.

Illustration:

(Is there someone in your church who restores cars or something like that that you could show a few pictures and brag on them?)

It's like taking an old classic car and making it look brand new. You have to... (I know nothing about cars) Or maybe like taking an old run down house and making it beautiful.

God wants to do that in your life. He wants to take the places and things that have been neglected or maybe the places that aren't working anymore, and make them new again.

Growing up, preachers talked a lot about "backsliding." Maybe you've heard that word. It describes someone who intentionally walks away from God.

And of course that happens. But in my experience, more people drift than backslide.

They mean well, they want to love God, but life gets busy, priorities get in the wrong order, things happen, and before you know it's been a while since you felt close to God or felt the presence of God.

Maybe that's how you feel? If so, I believe God wants to do something new in your life, and he's going to use the story of Ezra to do it.

Setup

We're going to start at the very beginning of the story today, but before we read, let me give you a little context of what's happening...

This story begins at the end of the Exile. The Exile is the period of time when God's people were defeated, captured, and taken to live in Babylon. That's why it's called the Exile era, because God's people are now living in a foreign land.

Some of our favorite Bible stories happen during this time.

Daniel in the lions' den,
Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace
Esther, the courageous queen who saved her people.

All of these happened during the Exile. And this is not the point of the sermon, but I think it's important to point out that it's possible to love God and be used by God even when you live in a world that's far from God.

Sometimes Christians think they're supposed to hide or stay inside their Christian bubble. But Daniel and his friends show us that it's possible to stand out in the world without becoming like the world.

- We need Godly business owners who lead with honesty and generosity.
- We need Godly teachers and professors who shape young minds with truth.
- We need Godly politicians who lead with conviction, not convenience.
- We need Godly artists and athletes, and advertisers who are so good at what they do that the world takes notice.

"The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." - **Martin Luther**

"The world does not need more Christian writers; it needs more good writers who are Christians." - **C.S. Lewis**

So that's where we are, at the end of the exile

- God's people lived in Babylon for 70 years.
- A whole generation grew up away from Jerusalem.
- Then Babylon fell to Persia.
- Cyrus became king.
- And after 70 years away from home, King Cyrus gives the Israelites the chance to return home and rebuild their temple.

They may not sound like a big deal to you, but I want you to imagine for a moment that another country, let's just say China, attacked the US and won a war against us. And they gathered up all of us and forced us to move to China.

We had to learn their language and their way of life. We had to get jobs and find homes. Our kids attended their schools. And we lived there for 70 years. Some of us would die there, but our kids and their kids became Chinese Americans.

But after 70 years, someone tells our kids and grandkids, if they want to, they can return to Canton, and they can restore and live in your house, and more importantly, they can start attending Generations church again.

That's not exactly what it was like, but it's close. This was about identity and heritage.

That's where we start the story...

Scripture

So let's start reading in verse 1 of chapter 1.

Ezra 1:1-4 NIV

1In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 2“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

This doesn't seem like much, does it? We like dramatic Bible stories like David and Goliath, or we like memorable verses like Psalm 23, “the lord is my shepherd I shall not want..”

But some parts of the Bible are historical record, so we can understand what was happening during that time. This is one of those parts.

Cyrus passed a law that allowed every Israelite to return home if they wanted to. It seems like a no-brainer, right?

But here's what's interesting. Most of the Israelites didn't return.

According to the records the Bible gives us: 42,360 people, plus 7,337 male and female servants, plus 200 male and female singers returned. That puts the total at just under 50,000 people.

But most scholars estimate that hundreds of thousands, possibly over a million, Jews were living throughout the Persian Empire at that time.

So only 50,000 out of a million wanted to come back home to the land God promised them to rebuild his temple.

Why did they not want to come? Because Babylon had become home.

- They had built businesses.
- They had farms.
- They had houses.
- They had stability.

Jerusalem, on the other hand, was:

- Ruins
- No temple
- No walls
- Economic uncertainty
- Hardship

Here's the point: Renewal requires sacrifice, and often **it's easier to just keep living the life you have than the life God wants for you.**

Renewal is available to everyone, but not everyone responds.

So that's what I want to focus on today: Coming back home.

For them, it was a literal home, but for us, when I say home, I'm talking about returning to our faith, our spiritual foundation, or spiritual center.

So I want to talk to 3 groups of people today who need to come home.

Application

1. People who have run away

When I say, "run away" I mean people who decided you didn't want to follow God anymore.

Maybe you grew up in church, but as soon as you could, you wanted nothing to do with it.

- Or maybe you went to college and decided Christianity wasn't for you.
- Or maybe you wanted to do something you knew you shouldn't do, so you decided it was easier to change your beliefs than your behavior.
- Or maybe you got hurt by someone in church and instead of dealing with the hurt, you decided, "I'm done with all of it."

- Or maybe you made a bunch of money and decided you didn't need God.

Whatever the reason you decided to run away. And now you're sitting here in a church service, and you're not exactly sure how you ended up here. Maybe you swore you would never step back into a church, but here you are.

Here's what I want you to know: You can come home.

It doesn't matter where you went or how far you've been gone. It doesn't matter what you did—you can come home.

I read a story this week about Francis Thompson. He was born in England in 1859. In his early twenties, he became addicted to opium, a common habit in Victorian England, and his life unraveled.

He moved to London and spent years homeless, wandering the streets, selling matches and pencils just to survive. He slept under bridges and in abandoned buildings. He later described himself as someone running from God, convinced he could not be loved or forgiven.

Eventually, a kind couple discovered his poetry and helped him recover. As he slowly rebuilt his life and faith, he wrote a long autobiographical poem in 1893 called *The Hound of Heaven* to describe how God pursued him while he ran. He described God as a hound (hunting dog) tracking him down. He realized that God never stopped pursuing him.

And at the end of his poem, he wrote these words that God would speak to him.

"All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home
Rise, clasp my hand and come."

You don't have to clean yourself up or beat yourself up for God. He never gave up on you. You can decide today, I'm ready to begin a relationship with God again.

But let me talk to another group...

2. People who have drifted

When I say "drifted," I don't mean you made some big announcement or decision that you were done with God.

I mean, you slowly, quietly, unintentionally moved away.

- Maybe life just got busy.
- Work picked up.
- Kids took over your schedule.
- You meant to pray, but you were tired.
- You meant to read your Bible, but your phone got your attention first.
- You meant to come to church, but one missed Sunday turned into a few.

Maybe there's no scandal. You just drifted.

Illustration:

It's like being at the beach and getting in the water for a while, and when you finally return to the shore you realize you're a long way down the shore from where you entered.

The current causes you to drift away from home.

Some of you grew up in church, and have incredible stories and experiences with God, but if you're honest it's been a long time since you had a real experience.

Now I want to be careful here to not make it sound like you need to be "on fire" for God. I'm not talking about guilt and shame or trying to recapture some spiritual glory day.

But I am talking about having a renewed closeness with God.

There are compromises in your life where you've settled, and maybe it's time to clean out your life a little bit. Maybe it's time to recommit to church again.

If that's you I want you to know something: You can come home.

You don't have to have a dramatic altar moment.

You don't need to cry for three hours.

You just need to tell God you want to come home.

But let me talk to one last group...

3. People who are homesick

When I say "homesick," I don't mean you ran or drifted.

You're a Christian, you're committed, you love God, but you just feel a longing for more of God. You're not satisfied with your closeness.

Illustration: talk about how your kids are when they come from college.

Maybe life happened, and you walked through

- loss.
- disappointment.
- unanswered prayer.

Maybe you feel spiritually dry. Maybe you've been so busy doing things *for* God that you haven't spent time *with* him in a while.

If that's you with a longing for more of God, I want you to hear me: You can come home.

Psalm 63:1 NIV

"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."

Conclusion

Many of you are probably familiar with the name Billy Graham (maybe put a picture on the screen)

I read a story this week about a time in 1940, when a young, relatively unknown Billy Graham was traveling through England on a study tour. The group he was traveling with visited the home of the famed preacher John Wesley. The group toured the small, private prayer room where Wesley famously spent hours on his knees each morning.

As the tour concluded and the students boarded their bus, the teacher noticed Graham was missing. Returning to the house, he found the young man kneeling in the very same spot where Wesley had prayed. Graham was reportedly overheard whispering the fervent plea: "Do it again, Lord! Do it again... and would you do it again with me?"¹

As I read that story, I thought about how many of us had praying parents and grandparents who built a strong spiritual foundation for you. What if you decided to continue their legacy, and prayed to God, "Do it again, Lord, Do it again!"

¹ While historians debate the exact location—some placing it at Wesley's House in London and others at Lincoln College, Oxford during a later 1947 trip—the fact that a prayer like this happened remains consistent. In the introduction to *Full Surrender* Graham wrote these words, "The outstanding memory of my visit on Oxford's campus was the study-bedroom in Lincoln College where John Wesley and his young friends started the "Holy Club" with its later development into the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. Edwin and I felt constrained to pray there for a repetition of the movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."