

Good News, Satisfying News, and Unfinished Business (Ezra and Nehemiah)

Big Idea: God is committed to his people, and It's satisfying when God's people respond. But God's people continue to fail, but hope is coming.

We're at an inflection point today, both in our journey through the Bible and in the story of the church.

This year, we've been journeying through the story of the Hebrew Scriptures, and what a year it's been.

We've seen a lot.

We've seen how this world began, and how it went wrong:

- how God created of this world as good and beautiful
- how we ruined the world through sin

We've seen God launch a rescue plan to save this world and his people:

- how he chose Abraham by sheer grace to bless the world
- how Abraham's family struggled, but how God made a nation from his descendants
- how God rescued that nation from slavery in Egypt

- how they rebelled against God even after their rescue, but God did not give up on them

We've seen the ups and downs of this God's people:

- how God gave them a land
- how God established a kingship that would never end
- how that nation kept on rebelling against God no matter how many chances God gave them
- how he sent them into exile because of their determination to disobey him

What a ride. Understanding the Hebrew Scriptures is so important, because it explains so much about this world. It helps us understand why the world is the way it is, and what God is doing about it.

But today's an inflection point. For the past four weeks, we've been talking about the exile. The exile is the absolute low point of the story of the Old Testament. In 586 BC, the southern nation was attacked by Babylon, a major world power at the time. Thousands were slaughtered. Survivors were driven from their homes, and forced to live and serve the Babylonian empire far from home.

Imagine life among people who'd killed your family and destroyed your nation. Even worse: imagine knowing that all of this is because God had enough of your wickedness.

But today marks a turning point. I have good news, satisfying news, and unfinished business to share with you.

Good News: God is Committed to His People

First, the good news. We read it in Ezra 1:1-4:

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.”

This is good news, really good news. This is good news for a couple of reasons.

First, God is committed to his people. Israel and Judah gave God every reason for him to turn his back on them. But God always keeps his covenant promises. His promises could be trusted back then, just like his promises can be trusted now. God shows grace and mercy to his people, and he refuses to let them go.

Here, after all, is what God had promised way back in Jeremiah 29:10-14:

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.

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 come 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, 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.

Let me talk about what this means.

When we look at ourselves, we have every reason to be discouraged. We are wobbly. We fail God so much. If we based our hope on ourselves, we would be in very rough shape.

But Ezra and Jeremiah point us in another direction. Our hope is not in our ability to obey God. Our hope is in God's commitment to his people. God is committed to his people. This is very good news. If you have trusted in Jesus for salvation, continue to pursue him. Continue to love God with all your heart. But remember that he is committed to you. He has bound himself to his people, and he will not let us go. God always keeps his promises. They never fail. You can trust his promises. You can trust him.

Here's the other reason this is good news. **God controls history to accomplish his purposes.** Ezra 1:1 says, "...the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia...." Amazingly, Isaiah had predicted this two hundred years before in Isaiah 44:28. Not only were people allowed to return, but they took the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken in plunder.

Here's the good news: God is relentlessly committed to his people, and he controls history to accomplish his purposes. That's very good news for us today.

Satisfying News: God's People Respond

But the news gets even more satisfying. Not only do the people return, but a lot of good things happen. I wish I had more time to go through all of them with you.

- In Ezra 3, they rebuild the altar and begin rebuilding the temple.
- In Ezra 6, after somewhere around 15 years, they complete the rebuilding of the temple and celebrate Passover.
- In Nehemiah, they rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

All of this is amazing. But one of the most encouraging stories to me is what happens in Ezra 7 to 9. In Ezra 7, Ezra restores God's word to the people.

We read in Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." In Nehemiah 8 we read a little about Ezra's ministry.

So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law...

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. (Nehemiah 8:2-3, 5-6)

I would have loved to have been there.

They read and teach God's word for seven days. They celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and remember God's faithfulness in the wilderness. They confess their sins. They renew their covenant with God and promise to obey him. They celebrate over the finished walls of Jerusalem. After all that's happened, this is a high point indeed.

The good news is that God is committed to his people. Do you know what I love to see? People who respond to God's grace in worship and love. It's a beautiful thing when God's people get a vision of God's grace and begin to treasure his word. I love watching God's people repent and turn to him again.

You know what I want for this church? That kind of wonder at God's grace. In the coming years, I want to hear that this church continues to grow in its love for God, that this is a church that treasures God's word and responds in repentance and worship.

I asked a pastor-friend this week for advice in my ministry. He said two things: preach God's word, and live by God's word. Sometimes it's that simple. Get a view of the grace of God. Treasure and delight in God's word. And respond to God's grace in worship and repentance.

Friends, pray for this for Liberty Grace Church. Pray that we are a church that never loses its amazement for Jesus and what he has done for us. Ask God to give us a high regard for Scripture and the strength to love and worship him.

The good news is that God is committed to his people. The satisfying news is when God's people respond by treasuring him and his word.

But there's one more thing.

Unfinished Business: God's People Fail

I've really enjoyed this sermon so far. I love seeing God's commitment to his people, and I love seeing God's people respond.

But today we're getting to the end of the story of the Old Testament. And things don't finish on a hopeful note. It leaves with unfinished business, with our real problem still unsolved.

Things are looking good right to the end of Nehemiah. But in Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah takes a tour of the city. He discovered that some people haven't kept their covenant vows. They renege on every promise they made. He finds the same old problems: the temple being misused; a lack of financial support for the temple; temple priests abandoning their posts to earn a living to survive; the Sabbath being broken; and intermarriage with people who didn't believe in God.

Despite God's commitment to his people, despite the return to the land, despite the rebuilding of the temple and the city, despite them treasuring God and his word, they still didn't change. Nehemiah ends on a bit of a downer. Is there any hope for God's people?

That's where we end at the end of Nehemiah. It's around this time that we hear from one last prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures: Malachi. Malachi has a message for the people. Malachi confronts the priests for their failure to serve God. He indicts the people for treating each other faithlessly, for profaning the temple, and for withholding their tithes. And then, silence. Silence for 400 years. But not before Malachi offers a teaser about what's going to come.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the

hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Malachi 4:5-6)

In the last words before the curtain drops on the Old Testament, with all the ups and downs and a disappointing end, God tells them to look forward. Look forward to his coming. Look forward to the prophet who will come to prepare the way. Look forward to when God will restore covenant faithfulness to his people.

God is committed to his people. It's satisfying when God's people respond. But God's people continue to fail, but hope is coming, and that hope's name – as you'll see when the story continues 400 years later – that hope's name is Jesus.

Thank you, Father, for your commitment to your people. I pray that you would give us hearts to respond. Make this church one that treasures you and your word, and that responds in worship and repentance to all that you reveal. And when we fail, as we inevitably will, turn our eyes to Jesus.

This is my prayer for this church with great gratitude for the privilege of serving her. May the story continue, and may it be all about Jesus. Amen.