

Renewal: *What the church needs now* An Introduction to Ezra/Nehemiah

Introduction: In 1965, Jackie DeShannon recorded a song that almost everyone in this room would recognize, even if you have never heard of the singer (which I had not). It has been covered and recorded over one hundred times, from the *Supremes* to Missi Hale who recorded it this past March for the movie *Boss Baby* (you can admit if you saw that movie...this is a safe space). It is a song that keeps coming back because of its simple theme, easy chorus, and timeless cultural message. "We don't need more mountains or meadows and have enough oceans to cross", but what the world needs now (sing it with me) is *love, sweet love. It's the only thing, that there's just too little of. No not just for some but for everyone.*" No definition, no object, no explanation of how this plays out or what it means, but just the identification that the world needs love.

With something so vague, no one can or would disagree. No one will say, "Nope, you are wrong, the world needs less love, but more mountains!" But this song also shows that world likes when solutions are vague, definitions are frail, and when answers can fit anyone and anything without distinguishing between right and wrong. This makes sense to our world, but does not make sense when it comes to God's church universal or this church particularly.

What we need, what every generation needs, is to make sure that we re-up the vision and mission of the church often and always. We do not live in neutral times, but are being bombarded by our enemy without who controls the systems around, and the enemy within, our flesh that seeks the path of least resistance, the reticence for change, and the relentless pursuit of our own desires. So before we break into a new study, we must review and renew our mission and God's vision for our lives in this world.

Renewed Mission: *What the church needs moving forward:*

Purpose:

We spent a good portion of the summer thinking through the church, its implications on us, and our responsibilities within, but it's good to refresh our thinking. Renewing has to do with **resuming, re-establishing, and repeating**, meaning each of these is important for faithfulness to God in His church. The culture around continues to slide, the freedoms once enjoyed may be narrowing, and the opposition will grow fiercer. And there is nothing new under the sun.

We are to **glorify God, make disciples, magnify Christ, and enjoy Him forever.**

Uphold Truth

1 Timothy 3:15-16 - *if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a **pillar and buttress of truth**.¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory)*

This means that truth, by nature, is definitive. It means that we will speak in terms of absolutes, and appeal to the conscience of man (Rom. 2:14-16) and the knowledge everyone has of God (Rom. 1:18-24). In a world that hates absolutes and wants approval for sin, this will be grating and will hate in return. People are not hated and martyred for being vague and lukewarm. Jesus was hated and crucified because of the truth statements He made: **I and the Father are One** (John 10:30)

Relentless in Love:

John 13:35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jackie DeShannon was right! The world needs love. But Jesus sets the definition and the object. “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He has loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Far too often we think loving people means that we cannot tell them hard things, and that acceptance of them as a person means we have to approve of their life choices. Love without truth is not redeeming love because love is defined by **how** Christ loved us: by taking our place on the cross since we were under God’s wrath because of sin. Love means that we throw no stones but say “go and sin no more”. Love points people back to God and His truth instead of trying to get people to like us or not feel judged by us.

Grace upon Grace:

We do all of this with and by grace, which is not only our motivating power, but our greatest purpose (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Cor. 15:10-11). We have received grace in salvation and thus give grace to others. We know we do not deserve God’s favor, so we call other beggars over to the banquet feast. We delight in God through Christ, not in a bunch of ritualistic traditions of restrictions and prescriptions.

To accomplish these audacious things, we must be committed to fundamentally simple, yet historically difficult things. We must be committed to God’s sovereign will, His inerrant Word, and His call to holiness. We worship God and call others to do the same in evangelism. We pursue a sovereign God through prayer. We pursue maturity and call others to the same. We are courageous to lead and train others to follow. The beautiful thing is that none of these is new, revolutionary, or a modern invention, but are what God has always called His people to. So we must renew our commitment to these because the stakes are high: David Wells gave a prophetic word (small “p”) in 1994 concerning the plight of the church in modern culture:

*“There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and a incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the past few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the ‘self’ movement, a psychologizing of the faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a **therapeutic culture**. Distracted by the blandishments of modern culture, we have lost our focus on transcendent biblical truth. We have been beguiled by the efficiency of our culture’s techniques, the sheer effectiveness of its strategies, and we have begun to play by these rules. We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of **worldliness into the church**.”¹*

Place in History

We must also remember our place in history. The church age we are living in is transitional. We are not permanent residents here, but have green cards in a foreign land. The more our feet get cemented and the more we are comfortable in our lives in this place, the less effective we will be to our mission. This is why the study of the OT is so important, since we will see where we stand in the progress of redemptive history. We are NOT trying to set up a kingdom right now. We are NOT trying to bring about a perfect culture now. We DO recognize that things WILL get worse before they get gloriously better, so we are NOT shocked when there is a growing dissonance of what we believe and proclaim and what people say they want. To see this, we need to elevate our view of Scripture and God’s big story.

¹ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, p. 58

Renewed Vision: *An Overview of Redemptive History:***The Big Story of God's Glory**

God created this world to display His glory (John 17:1-5), to make Himself known (Rom. 1:18-20), and to share as an overflow the relationship that He had in the Godhead with His creation. He created Adam and Eve perfectly, to "be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:28), to keep and work the Garden (2:15), to enjoy marriage, sex, procreation, the fruits of creation, and to do it all to His glory in worship. This was Paradise where there was no separation of happiness and holiness, no distinction between personal gratification and satisfaction in God. But with the violent introduction of sin, everything changed. God sent mankind out of Paradise, death was now a reality, and brokenness was the norm. But God did not leave us without hope. He offered hope through **the SEED of Eve** (Gen. 3:15) which was the first promise of One that would be born to mankind that could counteract the curse.

After generations that saw a universal flood (Gen. 6-8) and a confusing of languages while establishing nations (Gen. 11), the promise of a seed was given **particularly to one man, Abram**, who believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). From this one man, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). Abram was a wanderer, never possessing the Promised Land, but he gave birth to Isaac, who then gave birth to Jacob. Jacob had 12 sons who would be re-routed to Egypt. They sold their brother Joseph into slavery, Joseph helped them thrive in Egypt, and the promise of God went through a **family**. This family was in Egypt for 400 years, a good portion as slaves. God raised up **Moses** to bring this family out of slavery, leading them to the edge of the Promised Land. Joshua finished the job, and the family had become a **nation, set apart** to live in homes they did not build and enjoy fruit they did not plant. God was their King, and His glory would be on display.

But generations arose who did not know the Lord or the work He had done for Israel (Judges 2:10). This led to centuries of a cycle where Israel's rebellion would be met with a foreign conqueror, repentance, turning, and God raising up a Judge to deliver them. This cycle lasted until Israel demanded a King (1 Sam. 8:1-9), meaning they wanted to be like other nations rather than having God be their king. This ushered in a time of **United Monarchy**, where Israel became **a world force, a dominating political figure, and Jerusalem become the hub of the world**. This was Saul, followed by David, through whom a **covenant** was made, that David's throne of his kingdom would be established forever (2 Samuel 7). This meant that any future King would come from David's line, and David's line would be preserved. This monarchy found its pinnacle in the time of **Solomon**, but things fell apart quickly after that.

Why is this so important to understand and remember?

- **All of history explains how does a holy God bring back a sinful people**
- **All of history then points to a culminates to Jesus**
- **All of history is moving toward completion**
- **So all of the OT is not simply a loose set of stories with moral takeaway** - it is rather the comprehensive narrative of how God offers sinful man forgiveness through sacrifice, demanding loyalty to Him alone, and promising patience, grace, and mercy to those who would repent.

Renewed Situation: *A Brief View of Israel's Predicament***Israel's Call**

This brings us back to the nation of Israel, in the Promised Land, with a Temple to worship, riches to enjoy, security on its borders, and God delivering all to them. They were supposed to be a beacon, a light to the other nations that there was only one true God, that He was worthy of glory and worship. They were supposed to live differently than the nations around, offering salvation to those nations who would see them and turn to worship (Isa. 45:24; 46:13; 49:13 *"You are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*) God's people, His Kingdom, ruling the world in righteousness and peace.

Israel's Failure

However, this did not last long. By the time we get to Ezra and Nehemiah, we no longer see the golden monuments and mighty power of Israel on display. Following Solomon, the monarchy divided, with 10 tribes following Jeroboam in the North called Israel, and 2 tribes staying together in the South called Judah. The Northern tribes rebelled under the harsh rule of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, who foolishly overplayed His hand (1 Kings 12). Israel set up its own worship in Samaria, eventually creating its own temple style of worship. They were led by successive wicked kings who turned to idols, set up graven images to worship, and turned to foreign powers for help, refusing to repent. God had enough and by **722 B.C.**, God raised up the Assyrian nation who came in and wiped out the Northern tribes, carrying some away but also resettling the land with foreign people with all their religious ideals and traditions (2 Kings 17). This not only produced religious syncretism, it produced what we know as the **Samaritans** of the New Testament, who were still despised by those in the South centuries later.

The South lasted about 150 years longer, since they had some awakenings of good kings like Josiah and Hezekiah, who repented, got rid of idols and idols worship, and led the people back to worshipping God alone. However, there was also kings like **Manasseh**, who reigned 55 years following Hezekiah, and he rebuilt the high places, made altars for Baal and Asherah, and **worshipped all the host of heaven and served them**. He said **"In Jerusalem will I put my name"**, which he did by building altars in the Temple and **sacrificed his own son in fire to these gods**. He conjured up omens, mediums, wizards, and fortune tellers, and shed innocent blood (2 Kings 21:1-18). Within years of Manasseh's death, God would raise up **Nebuchadnezzar** from Babylon **"to remove them out of His sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done."** (2 Kings 24:3)

This brings us to **2 Chronicles 36**, which tells us of the final demise of the nation of Judah, the last part of God's kingdom with Israel. There were **3 times Babylon came and deported people from Judah** (and Jerusalem)

- 1: **605 B.C** - Jehoiakim was king and was bound and brought back to Babylon, and the Temple was stripped of its wealth, gold, and treasures; **Daniel** and his friends were deported at this point
2. **597-598 B.C** - Jehoiachin did evil and was deported, along with 10,000 craftsman, officials, men of valor, and Ezekiel the prophet. The poor were left in the land.
3. **586 B.C** - Zedekiah is king at 21 years old, and did what was evil in God's sight for the 11 years of his reign. He rebelled against God and Nebuchadnezzar, which brought the final judgment through Babylon.
 - They put Jerusalem under siege for over 18 months, during which time there was famine in the land and people were dying of starvation even more than the sword
 - The Temple and royal houses were burned to the ground
 - The Wall was broken down (a real wall that was for protection in any ancient city)

- More people were carried off into exile, and only the poorest winemakers and plowmen were left
- Any and all wealth remaining within the Temple was emptied out
- They took the priest, officials, councilmen, and 60 other leaders and executed them
- Zedekiah had his eyes gouged out, but before that, the last view he had was his sons getting killed right in front of him.

This was the end of a great dynasty, a world power that trusted in themselves, turning from the One that gave it all to them. The land was in ruin. The only ones left were the weakest and poorest without protection or leadership. What once was a great monument of worship laid in a funeral pyre, heaped up in remembrance of rebellion. Even the puppet Governor set up (Gedaliah) was killed and most fled to Egypt (the ironic twist of returning to a place of one time slavery, now for safety - 2 Kings 25:26). The rest were scattered to try to live within a foreign land, with foreign rulers, and no centralized leader to help them. This was the severest of pruning. It is this place that becomes the setting of our study of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Israel's Hope

In God's glorious plan, however, this was exactly the way He said it would go. God had sent **Jeremiah to prophesy** for repentance, and since the people refused, God gave this specific prophecy to Jehoiakim, king of Judah, in **Jeremiah 25:1-11**:

- I have spoken consistently but you have not listened nor inclined your ears to hear, and thus have provoked the Lord to anger
- God will raise up Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, **my servant**, to devote you to destruction
- The whole land will lie in ruin and you will serve him for **70 years**
- After 70 years I will punish the king of Babylon and the nation
- Then I will bring you back under the direction of **Cyrus** (Isa. 44:28 and 45:1 amazingly prophesied this **200 years before the events!**)

Ezra begins with the end of the 70 years! Look at **2 Chronicles 36:22-23**, and see that God fulfilled His promise to stir in the heart of Cyrus of Persia to allow Israel to return. So the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is a story of rising from the ashes, from returning because of promise, and restoring what once was. There are **3 returns we will look at in these books**:

1) RETURN- 538 B.C under Zerubbabel - A small band returned to rebuild the Temple, but faced opposition along the way, stopped, had to have Haggai and Zechariah (520 B.C) prophesy to get them going again, and finally got it rebuilt, but it paled in comparison to its former glory

2) RESTORE - 458 B.C under Ezra - Ezra was sent to teach the people who had neglected God's Word, so he went back to study, do, and teach the people, calling them to repent from intermarriage and neglecting their worship of God alone

3) REBUILD - 445 B.C under Nehemiah - Nehemiah came back to rebuild the wall that laid in ruins and meant the people could not live in peace from their neighbors. Nehemiah showed true leadership in the midst of opposition when everyone else had failed to step up.

RETURN. RESTORE. REBUILD. This is the rhythm we see in these ancient stories, but it absolutely what we need today. We return to the Lord in repentance. We are restored in a right relationship with Him because Jesus upheld God's glory on the cross. And we rebuild a life of faithfulness to His glory, calling others to do the same.

Renewed Commitment: *Relevant Lessons from and Ancient Story*

God's Silent but Active Hand Means Everything

We will see that in spite of all the terrible consequences Israel had to face, God was faithful to His promises. He *stirred the spirit of Cyrus to accomplish His purposes....The good hand of my God was upon me* (Neh. 2:8). There were no "miracles" done in these books, but we see God responding to the prayer of His people to move history to accomplish His purposes. That means that God is always working even when we cannot see. He is not only powerful, but He is good, and will always do what is right and best for His own. *What is your view of God right now? Questioning Him? Hate Him? Don't understand Him? Having a hard time trusting Him? Having a hard time seeing Him as good?* These are the questions you will be able to think through in this study.

Confession, Repentance, and Holiness

This is the rhythm of the whole Bible and the good news we cling to. God calls us to confess our sin, turn from it, and walk in newness of life and holiness. When we do that, we not only enjoy blessing, but we have joy. When we choose to follow our own way, we not only are at odds with Him, we move toward hopelessness? *When was the last time you confessed sin? Is your life just like the world and those around you, or distinct? Are you growing in holiness or has there been little change or growth in the last days/weeks/months/years?* True maturity breeds confession and repentance, and always moves toward holiness, as we move closer to God in Christ.

Refreshing Ourselves in the Means of God's Grace

There are three distinct means of grace seen in these books: **worship** in the Temple, **the study, teaching, and acting on God's Word, and prayer**. All three seem simple, yet are often neglected. All three seem like they are outdated and ineffective for church health and growth if we are to believe some, but these three are the fundamental and foundation components to a healthy church and faithful life. *Are you exercising these means of grace, or neglecting them? Are these growing stronger or sporadic at best? Are these the means by which you "taste and see that the Lord is good", or are you looking for something else.*

What the world needs now? We need refreshing. We need to remember the big story of God's glory, and retrain our thinking that life is about Him, about what He is doing, and where this life is going. We are strangers and aliens awaiting a better Kingdom to come. Seeing God's faithfulness in the past reminds us that He will always keep His promises in the future.