

Faith and Sight

Ezra 3:8-13

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So as Dick said a little earlier, this is continuing in a series that is called “by faith.” As we’ve taken a break from the Book of Hebrews, and we will begin again in the fall in chapter 11, the “by faith” chapter, if you will. But we’ve chosen to take this summer, if you’re visiting with us, to look at the life of faith, but from various perspectives. And this throughout various portions of the history of God’s people in the Old Testament. And this week, we arrive at the Book of Ezra. Now, I must tell you that the Book of Ezra needs to also be read in the same time as the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra and Nehemiah working together at the same time in Jerusalem. Nehemiah being a governor, Ezra being a priest. And so you have their like-minded goals of seeing the work of God proclaimed, his glory announced, and the people to be renewed.

And so you’ve heard that faith is not by sight. But there comes a point at which the things that we can’t yet see do come into fruition. This book and the events in it happen after seventy years of exile in Babylon because of the unfaithfulness of God’s people, their rebellion against God, their unwillingness to worship him and him alone, to trust in themselves and their own wisdom and not in his. And he simply allowed them to experience the consequences of their own decisions. And so they fell under the very difficult rule of Babylon. And yet he told them and he asked them and he reminded them and he commanded them to be faithful to him, even while in exile. We hear it in the prophet Jeremiah, “To seek the flourishing of the city where I plant you.” And so they were to grow in number. But the sad story is they did not seek the flourishing. They did not seek the Lord. The northern kingdom was destroyed, and the southern kingdom would also be destroyed, to the point where the temple now has not been rebuilt for seventy years. It was burned to the ground.

What are the implications of this? What happens in the life of Ezra? What happens in the life of God’s people when they are renewed? We hear it this morning, that after seventy years of waiting, how will the Lord bring renewal? Now comes the fruit of that faith, when that is now seen in the renewing of God’s people. We look at Ezra 3:8-13, but I will also, as we go through the sermon, look at what I believe is a parallel in Nehemiah 8. So if you have your Bibles, have them at the ready. Ezra 3:8-13.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

We ask you, O Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that you would pour out your Word and pour out your Spirit together in the hearts of your people here at Columbia Presbyterian Church this morning. Father, not only with us, but with your church around the world, with your church in this city. Lord, we ask that you would pour out your Spirit mightily to bring about renewal of a fervent and active love for the Lord Jesus, for the Lord God, and for his Holy Spirit, and a love and a desire for studying and proclaiming his Word and rejoicing and weeping that the Lord is good, and he is faithful. Do this, we ask. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So as we look at God's Word this morning, you will see in the outline faith and sight, and rooted in character. Faith and sight, also rooted in character. So when we see together this passage, which is displayed for us, it comes after a full year of activity. For when Ezra begins, it begins a year prior to the events which we read here. And so in the return, you will see in your outline the return from Babylon to Jerusalem is to be considered and is in parallel in many ways in terms of themes and activity as the Exodus was in their entrance into the Promised Land. This is, as some would call it, a second Exodus, where God freed his people from Egypt, though through their disobedience he allowed them to experience the consequences of their own rebellion. And they wandered in the desert until such time as Joshua led them into the Promised Land.

And here we see the same kinds of parallels—a second Exodus, as they would leave not Egypt this time, but Babylon. And when they do, they do so by means of God's provision. For surrounding nations, offered gifts, they too brought back into Jerusalem a lot of the things which were once a part of the nation of Israel and a part of the first temple. They would bring those things that had been kept safe to return to Jerusalem. What is important is you will see, if you read these two books together, that ten times the name of Moses is uttered in both Ezra and Nehemiah. And what we see is that the people of God and the names of the people of God are given great emphasis in these two books. Even you can see in this brief portion of Ezra that I have read, that the genealogies are important. Why? Because what is being established by Ezra and Nehemiah is that this is the fruition of God's faithful promise that he would keep for himself a remnant.

We saw last time that we were together, last week when we looked at the Book of Kings—what we see is that though that was at the beginning, the splitting of the nation of Israel to Israel the northern kingdom and Judah to the south, that he would prophesy that actually they will not follow the Lord, but the Lord will retain for himself a remnant. That remnant would return to Judah, to the city of Jerusalem. And so the establishment of the names in Ezra and Nehemiah are important. Because what they're trying to establish is this is the remnant of God's people Israel. So in their return, it is not only a fresh work, but it is connected to the faithfulness of God's promise. So at the outset, as we look at these verses together, this is not because someone woke up one morning and said, "Hey, I think it would be really good to go back to Jerusalem." This is God's sovereign hand that has brought it about. It is God's sovereign hand that has freed them from Babylon. It is God's sovereign hand that has led them back to Jerusalem. It is God's sovereign hand that has kept them from bloodshed, from enemy nations coming in and getting them again, because they are greatly outnumbered. And yet the Lord enables them, leads them, in the return.

But what happens in their return? We read in these verses, it is the rebuilding. What is being rebuilt? It is the temple that had been, as I said, nonexistent for seventy years. Now, many of you remember, who were with us—I wasn't with you the whole time. I got to ride the wave at the end. Which was the time that you had to not be in this building, and you had to worship at a high school just to our west. And all that that meant. Now, imagine that there is no church, no building, and there's no gathering of God's people for corporate worship for seventy years. God's Word was not read corporately for seventy years. There was no celebration of feasts. There was no leading of the priest for the people of God in the day of atonement, because there was no place to offer sacrifices.

This is hard for us to imagine, because we think, "Well, if we didn't have this church, we would just go to another." Except imagine that there were no such places to do that. No only were there no such places to do that—there was obviously no existent desire to do that, except in a few. But they could not make it happen on their own. And so in the return, after seventy years of no sacrifices, no worship, no feast, no attending to God's Word, now the rebuilding of merely the wall around the temple court is being rebuilt. They haven't even begun the structure yet. They're just rebuilding the wall. And when they do, the priests put on their vestments. Not like the lawyer-ware we wear today, but robes and all of those things. And then they tell the Levitical priests—anyone in the Levitical line older than twenty years, they are to give themselves to this rebuilding.

But we read in Ezra 2 that not only were they rebuilding—they were also reading God's Word together, the law of Moses. And in so doing, what we hear are these words, verse 11, "And they sang responsively." Now, for many churches, a church like ours, even singing responsively—it's called antiphonal singing. We tried it this morning. We need to work on it, right? But it's hard. It's not easy. So this is what they did. Imagine if this side of the room said one part, and this side of the room said the other, and they just kept repeating it to one another. And this is what they said, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And they repeated it. And they echoed it. And they sang it. And they shouted it at the top of their lungs. The rebuilding of the temple is the restoration of God's people for worship. What is happening here is not just the rebuilding of a place to worship. It is the revival of God's people. I'll return to that in just a moment.

But notice the response. The response that we read here is that there were "many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy." There were some who had not seen the first house, and they were laughing and in joy. But there were others who were weeping and crying. But what kind of weeping and crying was it? Leaving it to Biblical scholars, they argue over what kind of weeping this was. Because that's what they do. That's how you get your PhD.

But saying that—one of the settled arguments is it's not a weeping of unhappiness. It is a weeping because they remember what the worship of God's people was like in the temple that was once and now destroyed. And now they're seeing their faith of renewal being brought to sight. And they are weeping with joy. And it is so powerful, the text tells us. And the joy is so powerful that it mixed together that you couldn't distinguish the two. You can imagine that when people laugh, they—and the same when people sob and they weep. Can we put in our imagination what this scene must have been like? It's not the only place that it is talked about. In Nehemiah, as I said, chapter 8, we read these words:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord

is your strength.”
[Nehemiah 8:9-10, ESV]

There is nothing wrong with mourning and grieving. But mourning and grieving is never the identifying mark, because it is never the end of the story for God’s people. Not defeat, but victory. Our feet may slip, but renewal because of God’s grace is promised.

Last night, I sat before this group of gathered Indian families and their children, and I was preaching from 2 Corinthians 1:20, that all the promises are “yes” in Christ. Does that mean we do not suffer? Of course not. We do suffer. Does that mean we only enjoy successes? Of course not. We have experiences of both success and suffering. But our promises are never bound up in that. The promises are yes and amen in Christ, because it is our redemption that defines who we are. Because it is God’s gift of redemption that defines who he is. This is a picture of the gift of God’s redemption and renewal, and he brings them back. And they read the word of the law. And the text tells us the following:

So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

[Nehemiah 8:11-12, ESV]

That’s the second time in ten verses that Nehemiah says “and they understood the reading of God’s Word.” As a servant of the Lord, as a preacher of the gospel, I will tell you—and knowing what it was like not to believe—that merely the reading of God’s Word doesn’t change things, unless the Holy Spirit attends the work of the reading. The reason why God’s people are renewed, the reason why the people of God start to understand God’s Word is not because of the eloquence of the preacher. It is because the Holy Spirit opens up the dungeon rooms of our hearts and our minds, and we begin to hear that the Lord is good and his love endures forever. And they hear this again. And they read the book of the law again. And when they hear it, they’re now hearing it against the backdrop of seventy years of disobedience. They’re hearing it against the backdrop of seventy years of captivity. They’re hearing it against seventy years of not gathering together to worship the Lord and to hear his Word. And the text tells us, “And the people of God understood the word.” That is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And in their renewal, they are told, “Don’t weep. Don’t walk around with guilt and shame.” What ought to greet the renewing and the reading of God’s Word? Say it with me. Shouting for joy. Drinking sweet wine. Yeah, I said it. Enjoying great food. Encouraging one another. Shouts of joy to the Lord. This is what renewal looks like. This is the response of God’s people. But to be clear, while this is faith and sight, while we hear the return, the rebuild, the response, it was not rooted in themselves. It was rooted in character. Not their character, but in God’s character. Notice again what they sing, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” It is rooted in God’s character. It is the steadfastness of his love.

Do you know what they would have read when the book of the law was read to them after seventy years? They would have heard these words. “For you are my people, and I am your God. I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Now they understand just how steadfast is the love of God. I said this to those gathered here last night, and I will say it to you this morning. We are here. And if you are a believer, you are here not because of your wisdom or background or your intelligence. You are here because of the steadfast love of the Lord God. And I can say to you in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and following the great words of Saint Augustine in the fourth century, God is closer to you now than he ever will be. Do you know that? That he has given his church the promise. He says, “I will not leave you as orphans. For it is better that I go, for when I do, the Holy Counselor will come to you.”

So now, what we heard read earlier in the service, we no longer worship God on this mountain or in this city, for we worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. So therefore the Lord says, as he was about to

be taken to the Lord, that he would give his Holy Spirit into wait. And what happened on Pentecost? He gave his Holy Spirit. And so the Holy Spirit is with those who call on his name. And when we are gathered in his name, he says he is there in a special way. So we can take that promise that the Lord is close to us as he ever will be. Because we are united to him by faith through salvation from our sins, through the work of Christ, and through the giving of his Holy Spirit. And in that day, he says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." And if we call on the name of the Lord for salvation, he will pour out his Spirit. That means he's close to you.

What in the world does that mean about the steadfastness of God's love? Ladies and gentlemen, this is what I want to say. If you are walking around today, and you are thinking that you can negotiate with God to love you because you're being sad enough or feel guilty enough for your sin, I will say—stop it. You can never feel guilty enough for your sin. You can never do enough penance. Because the Lord loved you first. And his love endures forever. And his grace is poured out on all who call on his name. And all he asks that we do is repent and ask him for forgiveness, and he will pour it out. For he is the one who leads. He is the one who is behind and before his people. And he says to you, "I have given my Son for you, and I have forgiven you. You are my child." All the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus Christ, because of his steadfast love.

Does he call us to confess our sins? You bet he does. Does his love awaken us from our sinfulness? Yes, it does. But he doesn't awaken us to guilt and shame. He awakens us to his steadfast love. Church, do you believe that? "I will never leave you nor forsake you," the Lord says. And Jesus says, "I will return and claim you as my own. But until I do, rejoice. Rejoice in the steadfast love of the Lord." But not only his steadfastness, but his faithfulness to his promise. For the Lord said, "I will be your God, and you will be my people. And I will never leave you nor forsake you." In a day and age where faithlessness is often celebrated, when people turn against one another, and the press loves to make a big deal of it, when people shout at those they once rejoiced in—what do I mean?

So today, I think, is the first time I've mentioned it. This July, today is the last day of the Tour de France. This is a great month for me. I love the Tour de France, if you know anything about me. I love cycling. So that said, I also once was a big fan of Lance Armstrong. I didn't have a problem with his doping, in that I understood why he doped, because everybody he competed against doped. That's a different subject. The problem that I had with him was how he treated those who accused him. And he mistreated people bitterly. He sued those who were telling the truth. He is no paragon of virtue. But I also knew deep within my own bones that I have to be careful that, though he doesn't need my forgiveness and certainly isn't asking for it, the question is, how do I treat somebody who I once celebrated and read his books and followed his training, even though I could never do what he does? That's been an issue, because he's rebuilding his career. He's built a very good podcast, which I've listened to every day. It's really fun and great and all that other stuff. But what's interesting is what happened to him a year ago.

In the city of Denver, he was traveling, and he had to be at a meeting, so he came down from his Airbnb apartment that he was staying in and called up an Uber. And so the Uber driver signaled that he was there. He goes down to the street level. And as he goes down to the street level, next to where he was staying was a bar that had an outdoor patio. And he was walking across the street to the Uber. And someone shouted, "Hey, Lance!" And he turned, and he said, "Hey, what's going on?" And the guy who shouted at him looked at him and said the four-letter word which I cannot repeat here, but begins with F. And began to chant it. And then not only him, but the hundred or so people who were on that patio began to chant, "Eff you, eff you." And he said to himself, he had expected that to happen more times, but it had not happened. But when it did happen, he was shaken to his core. And he didn't know what to do. He got into that Uber, and he began to drive away. And in the back seat, he was shaking. He's like, "You're Lance Armstrong. You have to do something."

He said, "Now, the Lance Armstrong of ten years ago would have jumped back out of the car and gone into a fight." But he decided to do something different. He called the bar and asked to speak to the

general manager. General manager gets on the phone. He explains to the general manager what just happened. And the general manager said, "I'm so sorry that happened." And he said, "No, no, I'm not asking for an apology. That's okay. But here's what I need you to do. Here's my credit card number. And I want you to go back out to the patio, and I want you to take the bill of every single person on that patio, and I want you to pay for it in full. And I want you to tell every single person who is on that patio that I get it. I get it."

What's interesting is we have a culture of celebrity that shows itself in many different ways. We have a culture that loves establishing people on a pedestal. And then when they fail us, we love to shoot them down from that pedestal. It becomes like a sport. That's what I mean when faithlessness in some degree is celebrated. We celebrate faithfulness, and we love to also shout faithlessness. How different is it that the people of God, those who call upon his name, gather together every Sunday for one person: to remember one decision of faithfulness, that is the Lord's. We become so enculturated that we fail to often hear just how beautiful and powerful is the faithfulness of our God. None of us are faithful to him. Not me. None of us. It is only his faithfulness to his promise. It is only his faithfulness to his love. It is only his faithfulness to his Word that he promises redemption and restoration. And it is only his faithfulness to his promise that brings about renewal and revival in his people. Is that what we want? Do we want the Lord to so display the steadfastness of his love and the faithfulness to his promise that we believe that the Lord can even bring revival and renewal to this congregation? Is it because we are in particular need of revival? No. It's that we all are. And I'm the head of the class.

Just a few hundred miles from where I stand this very moment is the city and counties where the first great awakening happened in this country. What happened was this. Samuel Davies, a preacher at the time, looked out over his congregation, and he said the following:

How common, how fashionable is this lukewarm religion. This is the prevailing, epidemic sin of our age and country. We have thousands of Christians such as they are, as many Christians. But alas, they are generally neither hot nor cold. Bu But it is our first concern to know how it is with ourselves; therefore let this inquiry go around this congregation: are you not such lukewarm Christians? Is there any fire and life in your devotions? Or are not all your active powers engrossed by other worldly pursuits?

[*The Danger of Lukewarmness in Religion*, Samuel Davies]

Ladies and gentlemen, I read that not to you—I read it to myself. Do we believe and have faith in the power of God's steadfast love and his faithfulness to his promise, that we can say that the Lord is done with us? He is not done with us. We have not arrived. But he desires that we grow in the rootedness of our faith, the rejoicing of his gospel to make it known that he can restore sinners, that he can renew the faith that so often feels so lukewarm. We say that we feel distant from God, but God is not distant from us. It is not he who has left. It is we who have.

But it is the Lord's promise that we call on, and we ought to call on the Lord's faithful power of his Holy Spirit to bring renewal and revival in this congregation that is nearly forty years old this year. But I say, so what? Unless our faith and hope is renewed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in his gospel, and in his Word. And it can only be done through the powerful outpouring of his Holy Spirit. It is only the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that is the great remedy for us and for our nation, the only effective preventative of all national calamities and desolation, and the only sure cause of a lasting and well-established peace is the work of his Holy Spirit. So says Samuel Davies in his sermon, *The Happy Effects of the Pouring Out of the Spirit*.

I call on you, if you are a believer and a part of this congregation, to pray for an outpouring of his Holy Spirit. But let me remind you of what is the key to understanding this text. The key to understanding this text is that the Spirit and God's power was renewed not in the world around but from the inside out.

The revival of God's people always begins inside the house of the Lord. May the Lord bring revival and renewal by his Holy Spirit in us, and may it work its way out according to his faithful promise and for his glory. For our cornerstone reminds us, not to us, not to us, O Lord, but to your Name be glory. I ask you, dear friends, faithful prayers, faithful members, will you join me in praying for a renewal of the Lord's gospel and the pouring out of his Spirit on us and on his church here and around the world, to make his Name great? To turn our faith to sight. Let's pray.

Father, renew us. I ask you in the name and by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon your church. Pour it out on the church here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. Pour it out on your church wherever she may be found, whatever denomination she is called by. Lord, I ask that by the blood of Christ, may you pour out the renewal of your Spirit and revival in the hearts of your people, that we may be brought to rejoicing—the rejoicing of the renewal of the Word of God, the gospel in its power, the steadfastness of your love, and the faithfulness of your promises—that we might sing together as your people of old did in the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah, “For the Lord, he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.