

Rejoicing in Restoration

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[0 : 00] Let's ask God for his help to enlighten us with his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that out of your glorious riches, you would strengthen us by your Holy Spirit with power in our inner being so that the Lord Jesus Christ might dwell in our hearts with faith.

Be at work this morning under your sovereign hand through your word so that we might come with joy and with a renewed desire to live for you.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, have you ever wondered whether you'll make it over the finishing line? I don't mean the finishing line of the Kuching Marathon.

I mean the finishing line of Life's Marathon. I mean the finishing line of the race God has us on.

Perhaps right now, life is just so hectic.

There's all kinds of work to stress over. There's aging parents maybe to take care of. There's responsibilities at church. There is family and friends to attend to.

[1 : 19] And you feel overwhelmed. Unable even to think of the next lap. Never mind the finishing line. Or perhaps right now, life is pretty discouraging.

You're working hard to fight sin, but you don't feel like you've made much headway recently. You're faithfully serving God and serving his people in some way, but lately it feels like an uphill task with no end in sight.

You understand from past sermons in Ezra that God wants to build his living church. That is the temple that is the living church. But the church still looks weak and fragile and very much incomplete.

Now where are the full-time workers? Where is the next generation of leaders? Where are the zealous worshippers? The finishing line looks out of reach.

God's people in Ezra 1-6 didn't look like they'll get to the finishing line. Now, they started off well.

You might remember the early chapters from previous weeks where a pretty big mass of them made their way from Babylon.

[2 : 30] And God ride down to business. They rebuilt the altar. They offered burnt offerings. They laid the foundation. They started off well.

But then, some enemies appeared. And first they sweet-talked. And then they actively looked to make life difficult for God's people. They wanted to frustrate and discredit them.

And when you know such people exist, you get afraid, don't you? Especially when you are in a vulnerable state. Now, don't forget, God's people are currently living in a city with no city walls.

And even here in Ezra 6, the frequent mention of Darius reminds us they still live at the whims of a foreign king.

So they get discouraged. Their hands get weak. They slow down. And in fact, they come to a complete stop. They give up.

[3 : 37] They couldn't continue. And all looks lost. But Ezra 6, verse 13 to 22 is here today to fire up our imaginations.

Today, God is here to say, I know right now it is hard to keep up. You're slowing down. You want to give up running. But come look at my word.

Come see what Ezra 6 says. And here is the key truth it wants to communicate today. God will get you and I across the finishing line.

God will get you and I across the finishing line. Can't believe that? Well, God says, let's start with 6, verse 15.

The temple was completed on the third day of the month, Adah, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. See that?

[4 : 42] God says to his people, didn't that feel like a total impossibility just a while ago? But now, I can even show you a precise date and time when you have crossed the finishing line.

Now, wouldn't that have been an encouragement to the very first readers of the book of Ezra? As they read verse 15, they would remember, oh yeah, God did get that building project completed. We've got the proof in front of our own eyes. We can see it. And that would give them hope as they face their own weariness and discouragements.

And isn't that an encouragement to us too? As 21st century readers of Ezra, God can get us across the finishing line.

But how did the people in Ezra reach that point? Well, from a human perspective, it looked like all the stars just aligned in the right place at the right time, didn't it?

[5 : 53] Do you remember what we saw last week? Last week, we saw our Persian king, King Darius, telling Governor Tartanite, don't interfere.

Keep away. I know that you want to stop these people, but let these people keep building. And the reason this Persian king said this was because of what another Persian king said.

Last week, we saw that the original decree of Cyrus granting these Jews the right to return and rebuild the temple was found in the Persian archives.

So they had the official seal of approval. And even better, we saw that King Darius also said, why don't we include their building project in the Persian budget?

Let them receive the official state funds. So this really is the best case scenario.

[7 : 06] And if we still don't think so, the beginning of today's passage makes sure that we do get it. Look at verse 13. Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tartanite, the governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Sheta Bosonite and their associates carried it out with diligence.

Now, that's simply amazing. Tartanite, of course, could have carried a grudge. He hasn't gotten his way and he could have sulked, saying, fine, I'll do what my king says, but I'll try to do it in the worst way possible.

He could have carried out his orders with reluctance. After all, if your boss is in KL and you are in Sabah, you probably can get away with just a little bit more.

can't you? And Tartanite, not being right under the eye of King Darius, probably could still have slowed things down, made life a little hard.

But he did what the king asked him to do with diligence. Things simply cannot get any better.

[8 : 33] But here is what Ezra 6 wants us to see. It is a point that has been made again and again throughout the first few chapters of Ezra, but now it is really hammered home.

And it is this. The best case scenario didn't come about simply because of human goodwill. Look at the second half of verse 14.

They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Arthasus, kings of Persia.

And I want to point out something to you about this verse. Now, it is a bit subtle, but see if you can follow me. You can see it is on the screen. In your NIV, it says the decrease of Cyrus, Darius, and Arthasusus.

That is, the word decrease is in the plural. And the NIV translates it that way to be grammatically correct. But actually, the word in the original language is in the singular, which is somewhat unusual.

[9 : 54] So if we look at the ESV translation, for example, it actually captures more literally how the verse is written. They finish their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Arthasusus, king of Persia.

Now, why has the writer worded it this way? It is because he wants to draw a direct parallel between what God commanded and what the kings commanded.

He wants to make clear it doesn't matter which king, which human king laid down the rule. In the end, they do what they do only because the God of heaven has decreed it to be so.

The command of the kings directly flows from the command of God. Now, it's similar to what happens in verses 12 and 13.

Have a look with me. At the end of verse 12, Darius says this, I, Darius, have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

[11 : 12] And then verse 13, what happens? Tetani carries out his decree with diligence. And so similarly, in verse 14, when God decrees, what happens?

The kings carry out that decree. So yes, on one level, the temple construction was completed due to the decisions and efforts of men.

But actually, it was ultimately deal to God. You see, God works through what theologians sometimes call the doctrine of concurrence.

It is the idea that God can and does work in and through human actions and natural events, actively directing them to accomplish his eternal purposes even as creatures act freely according to their own nature.

Imagine plants that germinate. There's one right next to me right now. Now, why do they do so? Is it because of natural laws? Yes, on one level.

[12 : 31] And yet, God is actively causing those plants to germinate too. It is God who is behind it. Or as Jesus himself once said, not one sparrow falls to the ground outside of God's will.

will. And this is how he works not just back then, but today. It's how he works in the here and now. This is how God will work in your life and my life. God never loses control. On the contrary, every nanosecond of our lives, God is exercising his providential care.

He's moving hearts, he's moving hands, he's moving lips. And that is why we can be confident God will get you and I across the finishing line.

You see, God's providence is no abstract doctrine. No, God's providence is the reason why you and I day after day can keep pursuing God and living for God and enduring for the gospel.

[13 : 52] Because God's providence tells us no matter what, our loving Father has got our back. even in a dangerous world where we face disease and disaster, deception and disappointment.

the fact of God's providential care means we can face them with courage and assurance no matter what happens, certain that God is always for us.

Or as the Heidelberg Catechism, question 28, puts it, what does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?

answer, that we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and that in all things which may hereafter before us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will, they cannot so much as move.

Now, did you hear that? because of God's providence, we can be faithful in adversity. Because of God's providence, we can be thankful in prosperity.

[15 : 25] I mean, wouldn't you want that kind of patience and gratitude to be evident in your life and my life? God says, internalize what Ezra 6, verse 13 to 15 is teaching you today.

Internalize what God's providence is all about, and you will get that. But let's pause for a second. I've been talking a lot about the finishing line, but just what is that finishing line? is it equivalent to our wants and desires?

Well, let us go back to Ezra's day. What is God exercising his providential care for? what's the purpose?

Answer, to make sure the temple is built up and restored. And if we zoom out to consider the whole Bible story, what is God exercising his providential care for?

[16 : 36] Answer, to make sure his living temple, which is his people bought by the blood of Christ, is being built up and restored.

To say God wants to get you and I across the finishing line is simply another way of saying God wants to present his church as a beautiful bride, pure, and blameless.

That's what God wants. So the finishing line is not about getting some Lamborghini or something.

And so any adversity he allows in our lives is to train us up in mature holiness so that the church will become that beautiful bride.

Any prosperity he gives us is to train us up to overflow with thanksgiving. Because as the New Testament repeatedly points out, there is no godliness without gratitude.

you. But there's one more thing to observe. Did you notice what is the big way God works out his providence?

[17 : 54] Yes, he does it through unbelieving kings. But look once again at verse 14. God also works out his providence through his word.

Back in chapter 5 verse 1 and 2, we are told that it was the proclaiming of God's word that caused the people to resume rebuilding the temple.

But now, in 6 verse 14, we are told it was the word that kept them going. They needed the word regularly so that they might continue.

The same thing that got them started was the same thing that kept them persevering and ultimately what got them to the finish line. And what makes us think, we are any different.

We too need God's word week after week to keep going. I wonder if you're sometimes tired of the Bible.

[19 : 13] I wonder if you're sometimes tempted to say, it's always about the word. I wonder if you're tempted to say, let's go for something else. After all, does God's word do anything really?

But hang on a minute. The psalmist says, by the word of the Lord, the heavens were made. The prophet Ezekiel says, it is by God's word, a bag of bones becomes a great army.

And Jesus himself says, in John 17, it is by the scriptures that we enter into the closest possible relationship with the father. And Ezra 6, here shows us that it is by the word that the people built and prospered.

God's word, you see, far from being unexciting and unproductive, is what endures God's reformatory movement in our lives will succeed.

So don't move away from the word. To do so is setting yourself up for failure. So here is the key truth we are getting so far.

[20 : 28] God will get you and I across the finishing line by his providence and through his word. But if that is true, how should we respond?

Well, this morning I want to suggest there are two main responses we are to come away with. We are to celebrate and to consecrate. Celebrate and consecrate.

So firstly, we celebrate. Did you notice how God's people reacted to the news of the temple's completion? Look at verse 16. They celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

And then look down at verse 22. They celebrated with joy the festival of unleavened bread because the Lord had filled them with joy.

Now, this is not like the celebration we found at the end of chapter 3, where jubilant shouts were mixed with tears of sorrow. This is pure joy.

[21 : 38] And I want us to look at verse 22 just a little more closely and notice the logic of the verse. Why is it that God's people celebrate?

Well, it says, God filled them with joy. Okay, so next question, how did God fill them with joy?

Verse 22 says, by changing the attitude of the king of Azaria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

Now, I wonder if that makes you say, wait a minute, wait a minute, I thought it was the king of Persia, not Azaria, that we're talking about here.

You know, haven't we been talking about Cyrus and Darius and all those people? Did the writer have a temporary mental block and accidentally mix up the kings?

[22 : 46] The answer is, of course not. This is deliberate. So let's work it out. What is happening here? Now, first of all, we must recognize that the king of Persia at this stage of history could also be referred to as the king of Assyria.

As one commentator says, since Assyrian territory now belongs to Persia, the conquering king becomes king of the people he conquered.

Just imagine if for some reason, Singapore became part of Malaysia again. then, it wouldn't be wrong to identify the young di-Pertuan Agong as the king of Singapore.

It's just an alternative title to highlight his authority over that land. But then, the question becomes, why?

Why choose to call the Persian king the king of Assyria at this point? And the answer is theological.

[24 : 04] You see, the writer knows his history. He knows that God has always wanted his people to be in his place, to live under his rule and enjoy his presence and blessing.

That has always been the case. I mean, that's how it was originally in Eden, wasn't it? they're in God's place, under God's rule and enjoying his blessing.

But, when did all that disappear? It wasn't simply when Babylon came.

No, remember, even before Babylon, God's people were in the promised land, so they were in God's place, enjoying his presence under his rule and his blessing.

But then, God used the nation of Assyria to carry God's people into exile. It was God's judgment. And Babylon simply continued what Assyria first did.

[25 : 15] And so, from the time of Assyria, God's people were not in God's place and enjoying God's blessing. They were in captivity under a curse. But now, verse 22, by saying that God changed the attitude of the king of Assyria by highlighting that word, it is as if God is saying that era has now come to an end.

This period of exile that started with Assyria is in the past. What is associated with Assyria is no more? And so, no wonder the people celebrate.

God has proven his character all over again. Many years ago, God brought his people out of Egypt to his promised land.

Now, that's what the Passover and the festival of the unleavened bread that they're celebrating in verses 19 to 22 are all about. It marks the time when God redeemed his people.

And now, God, once again, has brought his people out of a foreign land, this time Babylon, to his promised land.

[26 : 32] It is a second exodus. And that is what sparks their joy. And for us today, we have an even greater reason to celebrate, don't we?

for if we were to read John's Gospel, for instance, what do we find? We find Jesus saying, the hour has come.

A new era is dawning. And we find God once again working through rulers. Governor Pilate says to Jesus, don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?

And Jesus tells him, you would have no power over me if it is not given to you from above. And that is exactly what happens.

Pilate finds that in reality, he has no power to free Jesus. The crowds make sure that every attempt of his to release Jesus fails.

[27 : 43] and so the attitude of Pilate is changed and he hands over Jesus to be crucified so that he becomes an instrument by which God's work of redemption is accomplished.

And that is why we celebrate today. You see, it is true that we should expect trouble and opposition in the Christian life.

But that doesn't mean the Christian life is all doom and gloom now. And the reason is because Jesus has already declared it is finished.

He's died and risen again. It is already true that we are made right and fully accepted by God. It is already true that we are cherished members of his household.

And that's why Jesus says things like this in Luke 10-20. Rejoice because your names are written in heaven. That's why Peter says, 1 Peter 1 verse 8, though you have not seen him, you love him.

[28 : 55] And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. You see, if Jesus has already crossed the finishing line, he will see to it that all who truly trust in him will do the same.

He will restore his living temple. And that is why we have joy and the joy that Jesus gives us will last.

If you locate your joy in something that could potentially fade, like possessions or experiences or good reputation, you will always feel insecure.

But if you celebrate what God has done in Christ, your joy is based on something wondrous and everlasting. So we celebrate because Jesus has crossed the finishing line on our behalf.

But that is not the whole story. because we know although that is true, we are still running the race. Now it's certainly true of the people in Ezra's day.

[30 : 12] Yes, they have rebuilt the temple. Yes, they can celebrate the Passover. But there's still no cloud of glory filling the temple.

There is still no king from David's line on the throne. And of course, there is still that question. Will they keep the law?

After all, wasn't it the breaking of the law that got them thrown out in the first place? And that will be a question that will keep getting asked in the second half of Ezra.

And that is also a question for us today, isn't it? Yes, Christ has redeemed us. But will we continue on in grace-motivated, persevering obedience?

And that's why Ezra 6 wants to show us a second way we should respond. We consecrate ourselves. We say to God, I commit myself to you, I set apart myself for you.

[31 : 26] God will finish what he began. So it makes sense to do that.

And that's exactly what the people in Ezra's day did. In verses 16 and 17, they dedicate the house of God. And one detail stands out.

in verse 17, they offered 12 goats as a sin offering, one for each of the tribes of Israel.

Hmm, wait a minute. Do you remember how in Ezra 1 and 2, it was only three tribes that returned? Judah, Benjamin, and Levi.

So why are they offering 12 sacrifices here? The answer must be because they saw themselves as representing true Israel.

[32 : 29] They are the true complete remnant. You see, in the end, being the true Israel is not really about whether you belong to a certain tribe.

Those who are the true Israel are actually those who say, number one, Lord, I need your sin offering to approach you. Who say, number two, Lord, I want to obey what you have written. And number three, who say, Lord, I identify as your set-apart people. Because look down with me at verse 21.

Verse 21. Did you notice who participated in the Passover? It was the Israelites who returned from the exile.

Yes. But not just them. It was also those who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord.

[33 : 48] You see, if you want to be included into God's people, what do you need to do? You don't need to marry a Jewish husband. No, you need to turn away from worshipping idols to seeking the one true God.

You repent and believe. Or as the Old Testament theologian John Goldingay says, whether you are exiles or people who had never gone into exile, the question is whether you have opened yourself to purification.

You could come from what you thought was the right group, but it would do you no good if you were in a state of defilement. Conversely, other people could come from what you thought was the wrong group, but they would become acceptable to God if they submitted themselves to God's cleansing. The people who ate the Passover could include exiles, people who had not gone into exile, Samaritans, or foreigners.

The only question was, are they people who are committed to making Yahweh, the one they seek, the one to whom they turn to for guidance, and for the answers to their prayers?

[35 : 13] And have they submitted themselves to purification for whatever defilement has affected them? You see, even in Old Testament times, belonging to God is no longer just a matter of being in the right family line.

Now, to get across the finishing line, what is really important is you need to separate and you need to consecrate. You need to say no to any other God, whether that's the God of other faiths, or the God of money, or the God of family, or anything like that.

And then you need to cry out to the one true God, Lord, I need your cleansing. cleansing, a cleansing that we know is ultimately found in the Lord Jesus.

And then you say, Lord, thank you for making me righteous, thank you for completely accepting me, for cleansing me, and because you hold me in your arms, I find joy now in living the way you want me to.

And that's what it means to be a Christian, doesn't it? today, if you're not yet a believer, well, here is an invitation for you. Will you seek the Lord?

[36 : 33] Will you separate and consecrate? Joy is waiting for you, if you do. And if you are a believer today, well, Ezra 6 says, guess what?

That's the rest of your Christian life. As you celebrate, you keep separating, and consecrating, that's what we do daily, weekly, yearly, for the rest of our lives.

Or as Paul himself says in Philippians 2 verse 12, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. I mean, that's just the New Testament way of saying what's in Ezra 6.

The finishing line is still ahead. But at the same time, we don't forget verse 13. For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

We don't forget the doctrine of concurrence. things. So my brothers and sisters, hear what Ezra 6 has to say to you today. Celebrate what God has already done and consecrate yourselves for what still lies ahead.

[37 : 53] And always, always, always remember that as we run the race of becoming God's pure and spotless bride, God will get us across the finishing line.

So keep running and let's pray for God's help now as we close. Father, we thank you for that truth that we are not on our own, that as we run this race, you are right there with us, alongside us, and even in us, providing us the strength and the energy to keep going.

So Father, we just pray that day after day, you would help us not to give up, help us to want to live lives that reflect the Lord Jesus, help us to put on the new self, to show his character, to display the fruit of the Spirit, to be people who testify to you with joy.

We just ask, Lord, that you would help us to keep doing that, remembering, Lord, that you would see us to the end. So help us to do that, not just individually, but also as a church, that you would help us to keep building for your kingdom as we seek to build one another up and encourage each other even as we see the day approaching.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.