

Text: Ezra 9-10 (Pew Bible, pg.469)

Title: “The Road to Restoration”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – The amazing story of Louis Zamperini is told by Laura Hillenbrand in the biography entitled *Unbroken*. As a boy Zamperini was a rascal who loved to solve his problems with his fists. Eventually his brother recognized that he had talent as a runner. He does excel at running and ends up representing the US at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. With WWII beginning Zamperini came home and enlisted in the US Army Air Force. He became a bombardier on a B-24 that was shot down over the Pacific Ocean. He and two of his fellow crew members drifted in a life raft in the ocean, barely clinging to life. One desperate day Zamperini, who was not a religious man, threw up a prayer to God that included a promise that he really didn't intend to keep: “God if you will save me, I will serve you forever.” Forty-seven days later they were captured by the Japanese. Through it all Zamperini courageously met every challenge with a strength of will that made him, indeed, “unbroken.” For three years Zamperini was kept in a Japanese POW camp that was kept top-secret because of the horrible torture inflicted on its prisoners. Through it all, Zamperini was “unbroken,” and when the war was over he returned home along with the other POWs. But this “unbroken” man began to be broken. Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Zamperini's nightmares pushed him into a liquor bottle and he became an alcoholic. His life and his marriage began to fall apart. The “unbroken” one was now broken.

In case you don't already know, later I'll tell you how Louis Zamperini's story turned out. But his life is a picture of the brokenness that comes into our lives because of our sin and the circumstances we face. It's not a matter of “if;” it's a matter of “when.” We will find that our world has been broken because of our sin. There will be times along the way in our lives when we realize we have missed the mark and strayed from God's will for our lives. When that happens, God's Word here shows us the way to restoration.

Open your Bibles with me to Ezra 9. Today I'm concluding this series of messages entitled “Rebuilding Your Broken World.” The book of Ezra teaches us about a period of time in Bible history where the Jews, having been in exile for at least seventy years were permitted to return back to their homeland to rebuild their city, their Temple and their lives. The Temple has been rebuilt. But Ezra knows that the greatest rebuilding that has to be done is the rebuilding of the faithfulness of the people of God. As I read Ezra 9:1-2 you will immediately see the problem.

In spite of the fact that the Jews still retained their religious identity as God's chosen people ... in spite of the fact that they had rebuilt the Temple and attended worship there ... many of the Jews in Judah had not been right with God.

And I'm reminded how easy it is to show up at church on Sundays and go through all the motions of being religious, but in our hearts we know we are not right with God.

You see, this is what God had in mind from the beginning. Did He want the Temple rebuilt? Yes. Did He want the people to resettle the Promised Land? Yes. But the main thing that God was after was the revival and restoration of His holy people. And that's where this is going ... restoration. But

what has to happen before we get there is difficult, painful and challenging. But the destination is beautiful.

There are five important intersections on the road to restoration. And at each of these intersections you have to “keep right.”

The first intersection on the road to restoration is called ...

1. **CONVICTION** (Ezra 9:1-2)

One day some of the leaders came to Ezra with some alarming news. Many of the Jews, including some of the leaders, have been unfaithful to God. They report...

Ezra 9:1 - “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices...

Ezra 9:2 - They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

Ezra is mighty in the Word of God, and probably as a result of Ezra’s faithful proclamation and teaching of the Law of the Lord, the people come to this conviction.

From the beginning we must know that there’s not one of these steps we can take without the help of God. And it starts right here with conviction. Unless God first awakens us to our sins, we will never seek Him in restoration. And God awakens us by His Word and by His Spirit.

And when He does we must keep short accounts with God. I’m sure that the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem didn’t wake up one day and decide to just completely throw off their faithfulness to God. It happened one choice at a time ... one relationship at a time.

Now what about this matter of intermarriage? This was a direct violation of the Law of God revealed in Exodus and Deuteronomy. It is evidence that they had not been faithful to hearing and obeying the Word of the Lord.

In our culture, and in many other cultures, racial and ethnic intermarriage is common. But here in Ezra we are looking at a unique situation. The nation of Israel was in a covenant with their God. They were a “holy race.” God chose this insignificant nation to the people through whom He would display His glory to the world. God had elected the Jewish nation to carry His revelation and to be a light to the nations. But what if, instead of being a witness to the nations, they compromised and became like the nations. This is what would happen if they intermarried with their pagan neighbors. Their hearts would be turned away from God to worship the pagan idols. And if the true worship of the people of God is contaminated the testimony of God would be compromised. This has nothing to do with racism. It has everything to do with the spiritual integrity of the people of God. These are the covenant people of God; He will not sit idly and watch them ruin their witness.

And church, when Jesus saved us, God called us to Himself to be a unique, distinct, holy people.

Titus 2:14 – (Christ) gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

This is our high calling. Anything that falls short of that should bring conviction to our hearts. So at this intersection we need to “keep right” if we are to continue on the road to restoration. The second intersection is...

2. BROKENNESS (Ezra 9:3-4)

And again we must “keep right.” A person can be convicted without be broken. A person is often convicted about their sin and guilt, but they’re too stubborn or proud to allow it to break them. Brokenness says, “I can’t go on like this anymore.”

Ezra 9:3 - When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.

Now this is not just a show. These were all classic demonstrations of brokenness, but it is clear that Ezra’s heart is broken over this. These are outward demonstrations of inward brokenness over sin.

Ezra 9:4 - Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Notice the words “appalled” (“stunned” or “shocked”) and “trembled at the words of the God of Israel.” Is this our response to sin and evil in our lives and in our world?

QUOTES: Derek Kidner, in his commentary on Ezra says this: “(Ezra) has a high sense of the glory they had betrayed, and he could not be reconciled to what they had become.” The great revivalist Roy Hession said, “To be broken is the beginning of revival. It is painful, it is humiliating, but it is the only way.”

So when we come to the intersection of conviction we keep right toward brokenness. The third intersection on the road to restoration is ...

3. CONFESSION (Ezra 9:5-15)

Again, at this intersection we must “keep right.” This is about dragging sin out of the dark closets of our lives ... attitudes, unholy relationships, or sinful speech. It’s about bringing our sin into the light before God. He sees into the darkness of our hearts and our lives; but restoration and recovery waits for us willfully bringing it out into the light.

Notice what Ezra does and what he says:

Ezra 9:5-6a – “Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed...”

Now would you just bookmark Ezra 9:6-15? It is a great pattern to follow when you find yourself at this intersection ... convicted of your sin ... broken over your sin ... what do you say to God? This is what a prayer of repentance looks like.

Ezra 9:6 - “O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

Notice that Ezra says “we” have done these things. This is corporate repentance. My sin is not just my sin. It affects the whole church. Your sin is not just your sin. It affects us all.

Ezra says our sins are so great that they are piled higher than our heads, in fact all the way to heaven. The word for “disgraced” literally means “blushed.” Isn’t it sad that we no longer blush over our sin and the sins of God’s people?

But I must just ask you to notice that, again, God is presiding over this whole process. He is the great mover of hearts; and He does so by His love.

Ezra 9:9 - Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

God never gives up on us. God has shown us “kindness.” There is that towering word in the OT ... *hesed* ... the great, steadfast love of the Lord.

But in spite of all of God’s kindness, we still have rebelled. “Prone to wonder, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, Lord; take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts above.”

So when we come to the intersection called “confession,” we need to “keep right” if we are to stay on the road to restoration. But then we come to a very important intersection called...

4. REPENTANCE (Ezra 10:1-4)

Here is where the actual changes begin to appear in the behavior of God’s people. And we have to make sure we “keep right” here. Reform ... restoration ... doesn’t happen without repentance. Notice how this plays out.

Ezra 10:2 - Then Shecaniah ... said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

O, how we need to hear this in the midst of our mess: “There is still hope...”

Ezra 10:3 - Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law.

Here is the heart of repentance. “Let it be done according to the Law.” In the New Testament the word “repentance” means literally “to change the mind.” But it will never just stop there. It involves the resolve to change our lives.

Note: The Bible tells us that the Law brings to us the knowledge of sin which in turn drives us to the Savior. Repentance is a turning away from something and a turning to the One who alone can save us.

The resolution to the matter was this: The men who had married pagan women had acted unfaithfully as to the Law of the Lord. Repentance for them meant that they were to send those wives and their children away. For some of them it meant they were to return to the Jewish wives they had divorced to marry pagan wives.

Note: We don’t know exactly what this “sending away” meant but scholars caution us about making the leap that God is here sanctioning divorce. Whatever it is, it is a making a clean break with the past ... separating themselves from their sinful past. There’s no question about it; these were drastic measures that were to be taken. Sometimes sin is so grievous that drastic measures are the only means of getting back on the right path.

What you see happening in the next few verses is a systematic way of repenting of sin. It would take some time, but they were committed to make things right with God. So along the way there are important intersections. And if we “keep right” at each of those intersections we will arrive at the destination called ...

5. RESTORATION (Ezra 10:16-17)

Now beginning in Ezra 10:5, we see that a proclamation was issued for all the Jews to assemble in Jerusalem. And within three days they had all gathered. It was a solemn moment, first, because everyone knew that they were repenting and getting right with God. But also it was a day of shivering misery. The verses here tell us that it was raining when they all came together.

Ezra 10:16 - So the exiles did as was proposed. Ezra the priest selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to investigate the cases,

Ezra 10:17 - and by the first day of the first month they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women.

So there is accountability here. We don’t laugh at each other’s sins. We don’t shrug it off and say, “O that’s just the way they are.” We are appalled at our sin. And there’s no one who says, “Well that’s none of your business. If I want to live like this you don’t have the right to tell me what I can and can’t do.” There was a sense of accountability to the congregation of God’s people.

It was going to take some time, but they were determined to make things right. And what you see here is one of the great revivals recorded in Scripture as the people repent and get right with God.

Let me tell you how significant this was: This rebuilt Temple would be the Temple that Herod would expand, and that the feet of Jesus would tread ... where much of Jesus' ministry would take place. And these rebuilt people ... these renewed, restored people ... would be the ancestors of Jesus. If the renewal hadn't occurred you might never have seen a righteous woman like Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom God used to bring us the Savior. You might never have found a righteous man like Joseph, Mary's husband who stood by Mary's side as she shouldered the task of becoming the mother of the Savior. You might never have found a righteous man like John the Baptist who paved the way for the Lord Jesus by his powerful ministry. That's how much this restoration meant to the history of the people of God.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – At the end of the book *Unbroken* something amazing happens to Louis Zamperini. By this point in his life the “unbroken one” is broken by all his sin and the circumstances. Louis' wife Cynthia attended the now-famous Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles in 1949 ... the crusade that launched Billy Graham onto the world stage as a powerful evangelist. Cynthia was saved. She went back to their apartment and told Louis what had happened and he was appalled. Cynthia asked Louis to go with her to hear Billy Graham, but Louis was having none of it. Finally Cynthia wore down Louis and he agreed to go. Louis tells of the conviction that he was fighting in his heart ... the conviction that he was lost. Billy Graham closed his message in the typical way: “Every head bowed and every eye closed.” Louis had had enough. He grabbed Cynthia by the arm and they walked out. Later in the week Cynthia wanted Louis to go again to the Graham crusade. They argued, but finally he relented. But he said, “The minute he says, ‘Every head bowed and every eye closed,’ we're leaving.” Zamperini attended with his wife, and sure enough, that night when Billy Graham closed his sermon and began the invitation with the words, “Every head bowed and every closed,” Louis pushed his way out. He paused in that sawdust aisle, looked back at Cynthia. Suddenly he remembered the promise he made to God floating out in a life raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean ... “God if you will save me, I will serve you forever.” Louis then turned ... and walked to the front of the tent where people were responding to Christ for the gift of eternal life.

When they returned to their apartment that night, Cynthia knew that Louis was a changed man, but she was shocked when he immediately walked over to the liquor cabinet. This is what he would always do as he walked in the door ... head to the liquor cabinet to get a drink. But what Louis did next surprised Cynthia even more. Louis grabbed the bottles of liquor, took them to the kitchen sink and emptied every bottle there. He was immediately healed of the nightmares and flashbacks that drove him to escape in liquor. In the years to come Louis Zamperini spoke at numerous Billy Graham Crusades where he told the story of how an “unbroken” man was broken and restored by the love of Jesus Christ.