

## I. Sermon

- A. I am always glad to see you, so thank you for joining us today. But I am extra glad today. Why? you ask. I am extra glad because today you are in on the very beginning of a new series.
- B. This new series answer some painful questions, some confusing questions, and some difficult questions about life and God.
- C. We are going to work our way through a book of the Bible verse by verse. This is called expository study, or expository preaching. I will explain the Bible verse by verse. Expository teaching is the solid food the church of today desperately needs.
- D. The book we will study is called Ezra. Please turn there. I hope that in a few weeks, your Bible will open naturally to the book of Ezra (or have digital bookmarks there).
  - 1. Today, please think with me on the topic of *The Three Realms*.
- E. First, an illustration.
- F. Let's say you're hanging out with a friend. You're catching up on how things are going. And the topic of diets comes up. Your friend says, I'm trying a new diet.
- G. You say, Oh really? That's cool. Which one?
- H. "I'm doing keto. You know, high fat, high protein, low carb. I'm doing the keto diet."
- I. "Great!" You say. "How's it going?"
- J. Your friend says, "Well, I really enjoy the food. A lot. But, I'm not losing any weight. And I'm not feeling any better. So, overall, I don't think keto is the right diet for me."
- K. "I'm confused," you say. "I know a lot of people who've done great on the keto diet. What are you eating on your keto diet?"
- L. "Oh, lot of potatoes. French fries. Lots of bread. And pasta, because you know... God created pasta... So, like I said, I really enjoy the food, but keto isn't working for me."
  - 1. What are you going to say?
- M. You're going to say, "That's not keto! You don't eat potatoes, French fries, bread, and pasta when you're doing keto. I don't know what diet you're on, but that's not keto."
- N. Simple fact of life: you can't blame a diet if you don't stick with it.
- O. I'd like to gently, compassionately, respectfully apply that to Christianity and to life with God.

## II. Ezra

- A. *Now 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, saying... (Ezra 1:1).*
  - 1. The writer is named Ezra. Ezra is a priest. Ezra is devoted to God and to God's Word.
  - 2. The time is very roughly 500 years before Christ.
  - 3. The situation is painful. God's people have been driven out of their promised land. God's people are in Exile. They have been scattered among the nations. Their Temple is destroyed. Their city of Jerusalem has been flattened. The nations of Judah and Israel are flattened.
  - 4. So Ezra writes during what is called the period of the Exile. Or if you want to be really fancy, the Exilic Period.
  - 5. Actually, as we will see, this is the tail end of the Exilic Period, because in this book of Ezra, some of the exiled people get to go back home.
  - 6. This exile had lasted about 70 years. Seventy years ago, they were driven out of their homelands.
    - a) Now, the Empire of Persia is the biggest kid on the block. The king of Persia is King Cyrus. King Cyrus, though he is good to the Jews, is actually pretty bloodthirsty. He is still a pagan king who worships idols. Cyrus would cut your head off if you looked at him funny.
  - 7. Now, if you rewind 70 years, earlier, back when the Jews were getting deported from their homeland, there was a prophet of God. The prophet's name was Jeremiah.
    - a) Jeremiah predicted that the exile would last 70 years. That's prediction is in the Bible (Jeremiah 25:12-13, 29:10, 33:9-13).
  - 8. When the 70 years of exile were up, God reached down from heaven. He reached into the heart of a man who didn't care about him, didn't believe in him, and didn't follow him. God reached down in the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, the the Word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled...
  - 9. Because no matter how many question marks you might have in your life, there is one thing you never have to question:
    - a) God always keeps his Word.
  - 10. And the Bible says, "the Lord stirred up the spirit" of Cyrus.
  - 11. What is this?
    - a) This is the God of heaven, working in the deep psychology of a pagan king, to effect historical outcomes on earth.
  - 12. I want to put the bus in neutral for a bit, and stay here.
    - a) *Lesson 1: We live and operate in three overlapping realms that impact our lives every single day.*
  - 13. What are these three realms? (credit to Gordon MacDonald for the names for these realms)

## III. The Three Realms

- A. *The Invisible Realm of the Heavenlies (Ephesians 1:3, Hebrews 12:22)*
  - 1. This first realm is the unseen realm. This is where angels fly. This is where demons spread their lives.
  - 2. This realm of heavenlies is where you find, God and the devil. Angels and demons. Truth and lies. Heaven and hell.
    - a) *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, (Ephesians 1:3)*

b) *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, (Hebrews 12:22)*

3. There is more to your life than science could ever explain. This is where truth operates, lies are obliterated, and evil is crushed, and compacted, and hurled into a place so far away it will feel the icy hot blast of divine judgement and never be seen again.
4. This is the realm where the Bible is the constitution, because everything the Bible teaches flows from the heart of the God who is over all.
5. This heavenly realm, this spiritual realm, is bigger than the material world around us.
6. The heavenly realm surrounds the material realm. The heavenly realm makes the material realm possible.
7. And the story of Ezra starts in the heavenly realm with a God who is a king above all kings, and who is working a plan that people on earth don't even realize is happening.

**B. The Inner Realm of the Soul**

1. This is the realm of your thoughts and your feelings. This is the realm of your psychology. Your dysfunctions. Your superpowers and gifts. Your instincts.
2. This realm of the soul is all important. It is your heart. Your mind. Your spirit. Your self.
3. It even includes your physiology, because so much of how we think and feel is tightly linked to bodily needs like rest and nutrition and health.
4. In case you ever wondered, God cares about your psychological health. You matter to him—body, soul, and spirit.
  - a) *So he answered and said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind," and "your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27).*
  - b) *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23).*
5. Here is King Cyrus, being fed clusters of grapes, looking over his kingdom, feel good about himself.
6. And suddenly, deep in his soul, an idea begins to form. That idea becomes a psychological compulsion for him. He can't shake it.
7. He doesn't even know where it comes from.
8. We know where it came from. The Lord stirred his heart. The heavenly realm influenced the earthly realm, but it was so subtle, that Cyrus felt as if it were his own idea.
9. And now, this idea is going to move from the invisible realm of the heavenlies, to the inner realm of the soul, to the third realm...

**C. The Outer Realm of the Streets**

1. This is where life happens. This is where history happens. This is realm of actions, and choices, and relationships, and work.
2. We work here. Go to school here. Live here. Die here.
3. This world is visible. Science can explain much of this world, but can never explain all of it, because it overlaps the two other worlds.
4. So God in heaven, reaches his hand into the invisible heart and soul of King Cyrus... and now history is about to happen in the outer realm of the streets.
  - a) *Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house [temple] at Jerusalem which is in Judah. (Ezra 1:2).*
5. A pagan king orders the rebuilding of the temple to God in Jerusalem... because the prophet Jeremiah said it would be 70 years and the clock was about to reach zero.
6. This decree of Cyrus will trigger massive action. One 40,000 exiles plus 7,000 servants, will start a long journey back to the promised land. And they will build the Temple that had been destroyed so long ago.
7. What is happening here? This ancient priest named Ezra offers a really sophisticated view of reality.
8. Ezra rolls back the curtain separating the visible realm of the streets from the invisible realm of the heavenlies and the inner realm of the soul. They affect each other. They impact each other.
9. Right now, you see history from the human side. One day, we will see it from God's side, and you will be blown away at the wisdom, and perfect, and grace, of everything God has done in your life and your world.
10. So Cyrus sends out a decree to exiled Jews across the Persian empire. He says the exiles can go back home. And he says when they go back home, they should rebuild their temple to their God.
11. Let's see how this played out.

**IV. The Beginning of the Return**

A. *Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who 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 build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2-4).*

1. The first thing Cyrus says, is that if you want to go back home and help rebuild the temple, you can.
2. The second thing he says is that if you don't want to go back home, you don't have to. But you should help rebuild the temple anyway. You should help with your finances.
3. These are your brothers. These are your sisters. This is your homeland. Don't turn a blind eye to your own people.
4. Here's what jumps out at me.
5. God was using a pagan king to teach a lesson God's people should have known all along.

6. Question: Hey Israel and Judah, why were you in exile in the first place?
7. Answer: Because we were stupid and arrogant and turned our backs on God.
  - a) Lesson 2: When you live a godless life, your life feels... godless.
8. If you are the parent of teenagers, or have ever been the parent of teenagers, clap your hands.
9. If you have ever wanted to teach your teenagers a life lesson, and they just weren't interested, clap your hands.
10. Pretty much the same number.
11. There's the easy way, and there's the hard way. The easy way is to learn from the mistakes of others. The hard way is to make the mistakes yourself, feel the pain yourself, and learn life's lessons in the school of hard knocks.
12. Most people are addicted to the hard way.
13. A thousand years before this story, the Jews returned to the promised land under Moses. Moses warned them. He said, God has set before you two ways, two pathways... the pathway of life vs. the way of death.
14. Choose life, and I will bless your nation. Choose life, and I will bless your fields. Choose life, and you will experience all that I have given you.
15. But over and over again, the people chose the way of death.
16. They disobeyed God. They forgot his mercy and grace. They worshipped idols. God still took care of them, but their time ran out.
17. Why were they in exile? Because they chose to learn their lesson the hard way.
18. Did they say, We want the hard way?
19. No. Nobody says that. They said, we want to be like everybody else. We want what looks like fun. We want to follow our hormones more than follow God's truth. We want to define our own truth.
20. That's what choosing the hard way sounds like.
21. And what choosing the hard way looked like, in their case, was exile.
  - a) Hey, Israel and Judah, what religion are you?
    - (1) Oh, we worship the Creator God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
  - b) Really? Do you listen to his Word? No.
  - c) Do you obey his laws? No.
  - d) Do you go to church? No.
  - e) Do you pray? Only in emergencies.
  - f) So how do you feel about your religion? I tried it. It didn't work for me.
  - g) What do you mean it didn't work?
    - (1) Oh, God promised us a land, but now we're in exile. See, it doesn't work.
      - (a) Isn't that like doing the keto diet while pounding down baked potatoes and bread?
22. Lesson three says when you live a godless life, life feels godless.
23. But let me underline the word *feels*.
24. Your life isn't godless. God is involved. If you are a Christian, he is involved in your life in ways you can't begin to count.
25. Technically, the Jews owned the Promised Land. It was theirs. Their names were on the deed.
26. Did they experience the promised land? No. They experienced exile from a land they already owned.
27. In the same way, a Christian is blessed by definition. If you have received Jesus as your Savior, then...
  - a) God has already blessed you.
  - b) God has already forgiven you.
  - c) God has already provided for you.
  - d) God has already proven his love for you.
  - e) God has already accepted you.
  - f) God has already approved you.
  - g) God has already empowered you.
  - h) God has already given you the victory.
  - i) God has already graced you to the max.
    - (1) But if you don't *feel* graced, or victorious, or approved, or accepted, or beloved, or provided for, or forgiven, or blessed, it's not God's fault.
    - (2) Now, let me get this in right away. You can be doing everything right with God, and still go through terrible times.
      - (a) You can be doing everything right with God, and still feel sorrow and sadness and pain.
      - (b) There were a lot of faithful Jews who were caught up in the nation's godlessness... Daniel was one of them. Jeremiah was another. They were doing everything right, and their worlds still fell apart.
      - (c) I'm not talking about that.
    - (3) I am saying that when you, as a Christian, turn your back on God, then don't be surprised if it feels as if he has turned his back on you. He hasn't, but it will feel that way.
      - (a) You will be blessed, not but feel blessed.
      - (b) You will be loved, but not feel loved.
    - (4) Because when you live a godless life, life feels godless, even for a Christian.
28. Let's go deeper.
  - a) This brings us back to the *three realms*.
  - b) Because in the heavenlies, God says you are spiritual royalty. God says you are already seated with Christ on his royal throne in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). That is truth in the heavenly realm.

- c) But what if in the realm of your soul, you don't see yourself as royalty? What if you feel like a slave, or feel like a pawn in a cruel universe, or feel defeated, or in despair?
- d) Don't you think that's going to play out in the third realm of the streets?
  - (1) *Lesson 3: A heart that is mature in grace responds more to the promises of the heavenly realm than to the ever-changing situation on the streets.*
- 29. This is spiritual maturity. This is the Grace Pathway. This is when theology actually heals psychology. This is when you rise above temptation. This is when you step out in faith.
- 30. God is true.
- 31. God's Word is truth.
- 32. What God says about you is true, no matter what labels the world tries to slap on you.
- 33. Here is Cyrus. And here are God's people. They have set up homes and business across the empire. This is their new normal.
- 34. Now, Cyrus invites them to leave exile and go back home.
- 35. And now, they have an opportunity to step up to a higher plane of existence.
- 36. They will have to sacrifice their new normal.
- 37. They will have to break out of the comfort zone.
- 38. They will have to endure hardship.
- 39. And God promises the rewards will be worth it.
- 40. What do they do?
- B. *Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:5)*
  - 1. Of the tribes of Israel, the main ones to respond were Judah and Benjamin—along with the priests and the Levites—descendants of Levi.
  - 2. Others joined too.
  - 3. But they all had one thing in common: God had moved their spirits.
  - 4. There are seven times in the Bible where God moves or stirs someone's spirit. Every time, the people go above and beyond the call of duty.
  - 5. And every time they do that, God rewards them with riches and blessings that money can't buy.
    - a) *Lesson 4: When your heart is mature in grace, and you follow God's promptings, you will experience riches and blessings that money can't buy...  
...often in the midst of stresses others can't endure.*
  - 6. Because God is more focused on your "invironment" (Realm 2) than your environment (Realm 3).
- C. *And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered. (Ezra 1:6)*
  - 1. You know what we call this? Grace.
  - 2. Grace is God giving you good stuff you don't deserve and haven't earned.
  - 3. Grace is the freewill gift of God, however he chooses to give it. In this case, it was money, given through God's people.
  - 4. These were people who were making a very hard choice.
  - 5. And into that choice, God poured grace.
  - 6. But it gets better.
- D. *King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods; and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles. All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:7-11, NKJV).*
  - 1. What was this?
  - 2. Remember me saying that the temple was destroyed?
  - 3. That temple was a wonder of the ancient world. It was built by King Solomon. It was covered in gold, and loaded with gold.
  - 4. Royalty traveled across the world just to see Solomon's temple, and all the gold it contained.
  - 5. When the temple was destroyed, it was destroyed by the king of Babylon, named Nebuchadnezzar.
  - 6. He raided the temple, and took all the golden and silver and sacred articles used by the priests in worship.
  - 7. Now, here they were, in the possession of King Cyrus.
  - 8. And what does he do?
  - 9. He gives them back.
  - 10. Every last one of them. He gives them back... 5,400 specific treasures that had been looted from Solomon's temple.
  - 11. They kept really good records. Now, a pagan, idol worshipping king, who only lives for power and pleasure, gives back from his own treasure the millions of dollars of gold and silver artifacts that were dedicated to the worship of God.
  - 12. You know what we call that? Amazing grace.
    - a) *Lesson 5: The God of heaven (realm 1) overrules the powers of earth (realm 2) to bless the hearts (realm 3) of those whose hearts are close to His.*
  - 13. And I pray that you would keep your heart warm and tender toward God. That is the Grace Pathway. And that is what we as a church are all about.