

I. Introduction

- A. Our society is fragmented. As a people, we are fractured and broken apart. I know there are exceptions, but would you basically agree that our culture is fragmented?
- B. There's a report out about something that is happening in businesses. Human Resources departments are seeing a bit rise in worker-against-worker conflict. They're gearing up for more.
- C. Our culture is fragmented. Our culture is fragmented because our hearts are fragmented.
 - 1. We have broken the link between truth and nature, metaphysically.
 - 2. We have broken the link between body and soul, sexually.
 - 3. We have broken the link between values and reality, philosophically.
 - 4. We have broken the link between heaven and earth, spiritually.
 - 5. We have broken the link between time and eternity, pragmatically.
 - 6. We have broken the link between Scripture and worship, theologically.
 - a) All these breaks comes from the Fall. All this brokenness comes from Sin. Sin is irrational.
- D. Our culture accepts contradictions. Our culture deludes itself into thinking there is fellowship between light and darkness. Fellowship between righteousness and unrighteousness. Friendship between Christ and Belial (Satan). Unity between the temple of God and idols.
- E. The fact that we accept contradictions shows that we have fractured our thinking. To say a truth doesn't stay true—to say that a truth can be true for me, but not true for you—is to introduce absurdity into our very souls. It's a break with reality. A fracture, like a broken bone, only spiritual.
 - 1. This is our brokenness.
 - 2. This is our fallenness.
 - 3. This is our irrationality.
 - 4. This is our sin.
- F. If our hearts are fragmented, how can our culture not be fragmented? If our hearts are broken, how can society not be broken?
- G. We need something to bring us together. But that is impossible.
- H. There can be no unity between us, until the warring factions within us have found peace.
- I. If you didn't get all that, just get this... Society is crazy.
- J. Society is crazy because it is trying to rip truth apart. In the end, it only rips itself apart.

II. How To Make a Comeback

- A. Please think with me today as we consider: *How to Make a Comeback, Part 2*.
- B. Today is part three of a series. The series is called Regather and Restart. We are studying the Bible. Specifically, we are studying the Book of Ezra in the Bible. And Ezra is all about Regathering and Restarting.
- C. Let's get everybody caught up.
 - 1. The time is about 500 years before Christ.
 - 2. The situation has been pretty grim, but now there is hope.
 - a) The grim part is that God's people were in trouble. Israel and Judah were conquered. Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was destroyed. The people were in exile to the four corners of earth.
 - b) This exile had lasted about 70 years.
 - c) The hopeful part is that the exile is coming to an end. God's excited people are going back home.
 - (1) They were scattered, but now they are Regathering.
 - (2) They were finished, but now it's a Restart.
 - (3) This is the book of Ezra. Regather and Restart.
 - 3. This is really good news.
 - a) It's good news for anyone who has ever gone backwards with God.
 - b) It's good news for all God's daughters and sons who have ever in any way strayed into the far country with any other prodigal.
- D. If you're willing, God will make you able, and you can stage a spiritual comeback.
- E. In chapter one, the decree goes out from a Persian king. This would be King Cyrus. This decree permits Jews from all over the Persian empire to finally return home, and build their temple and their city.
 - 1. Chapter one says, It's okay to make a comeback.

III. Now these are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city. Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel. (Ezra 2:1, 2, NKJV)

- A. Chapter two, as we saw last time, is basically a spreadsheet of people who made the return. Seventy verses long, and 64 of them are lists of names and numbers.
- B. Family after family, and how many from each family, made a comeback from exile.
 - 1. These are the people who returned. There were a lot of reasons for them not to return.
 - a) First, they had grown very comfortable in the Persia Empire. They had homes and businesses. They had roots and their kids had friends in exile. They were comfortable in exile.
 - b) Back in Jerusalem and Judah, they would have to start over. The land had not been farmed. The houses had fallen apart. The wells were not tended. There were wild animals, and hostile neighbors, and no government, and why go through that hassle? There were a lot of reasons not to return.

2. And it was only a small number that did—out of several million Jews scattered throughout the world, only 47,000 came back in this first wave.
3. For the overwhelming majority, exile was their new normal.
- C. And so it is for so many Christians who have set God on the sidelines of their hearts. Their hearts are cold toward God. Their conscience bothered them for a while. But they are long past that. Spiritual exile is their new normal.
 1. They are comfortable. They have wrapped their schedule around a life without God, and now there is no time.
 2. And even when the call goes out... come back home to God... a chorus of voices rises up to put God off, and to set him aside, and to say why now is not the time.
 - a) But there were some who set aside all the excuses and rationalizations and made the trip back where they belonged.
- D. Why did they return? Because they were the people of Israel and Israel was where they belonged.
- E. And we said that the first step in making a comeback is to
 1. *Remember Your Identity.*
- F. If you are saved, you belong to God. And if you belong to God, your most natural place, your most powerful place, your most blessed place is wherever God has called you... which is wherever you rise the highest as a royal child of God.
- G. When the Jews went home, even though it was uncomfortable, and even though they would have to create a new, new normal...
- H. When they went back home they were going to the place where they could rise up to their truest, highest, most noble calling in God.
- I. This is where they could be who God made them to be, where their identity could shine forth, so this is where they belonged.
- J. If you are a Christian who has strayed from God... remember who you really are... your truest deepest identity in Christ.
- IV. *Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place: According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly garments. So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities. (Ezra 2:68-70)*
 - A. When they moved back to Jerusalem, they found a mess.
 - B. But it says, When they came to the house of the Lord... well when they came to the house of the Lord, the house of the Lord was a pile of rubble. The whole reason they came was to rebuild it, and to restore on earth a testimony to the invisible Creator God in heaven.
 - C. But through faith, they believed that one day the Temple would rise from the rubble.
 - D. And they believed it so much, they offered freely to the house of God. Gold, and silver, and valuable garments.
 - E. They gave a huge offering. A generous offering. A sacrificial offering. They gave to fulfill their mission because they believed in it so much.
 - F. But—do not miss this—why did these people have so much to give to the Lord in the first place?
 - G. They had so much because when they came back from exile, their neighbors and their friends and even the Persians around them piled them with gold and silver and treasures they did not work for or earn. So did the Persian King Cyrus.
 - H. These were people who did not even believe in God who were pouring their treasures into the laps of God's people...
 - I. When God's people gave, willingly, and according to their ability, they were only returning to God a portion of the grace he poured out on them in the first place.
 - J. Because the second step in making a comeback, as we saw last time is:
 1. *Reclaim Your Inheritance.*
 - K. They went back to their cities, verse 70 says. They reclaimed the property they had left behind and the fields that were dormant.
 - L. These cities belonged to them, but they did not enjoy them for 70-plus years.
 - M. And now, they are taking back what is theirs. Reclaim your inheritance.
 - N. What is your inheritance?
 1. The Bible is your inheritance, a treasury not only of wisdom and truth, but of power and a sound mind. If you have set the Bible aside, pick it back up. Reclaim your inheritance.
 2. Prayer is your inheritance, a pipeline to the governing throne of all creation. Reclaim your inheritance every single day.
 3. The weapons of your warfare are your inheritance, the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of the gospel of peace, and the sword of the Spirit. Take them up every single day.
 4. Church is your inheritance, little colonies of heaven on earth, to instruct and nurture, and love, and live the gospel as ambassadors sent by God. Do not lightly subtract church from your life. It is part of who you are, part of what makes you whole, and central to de-fragmenting the breaks of your heart.
 5. The promise of God is your inheritance, for every situation, and circumstance of life, for you to know and believe and claim, and a ground on which you take your stand.
 - a) *...giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Colossians 1:12)*
 - O. To lay down your inheritance, is to make exile normal.
 - P. But to pick up your inheritance... is to make your comeback real.
 1. To pick up your Bible, to pick up prayer, to take up the weapons of your warfare, to take back up the church which is the doom of the devil, and to take your stand on the promises of God... is to come back to your true self, your most noble self as God has made you in Christ.
 - Q. Remember your identity. Reclaim your inheritance.
 - R. And there's one more big step in a comeback.

- V. *And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. (Ezra 3:1, 2, NKJV)*
- A. This is chapter 3. Seven months have gone by. For seven months, the people have been setting up shop. Building homes. Digging wells. Cultivating fields.
 - B. They are God's people in God's place, enjoying their inheritance, and reclaiming their identity.
 - C. Now, seven months have gone by. Their families are okay. Their homes are okay.
 - D. It is time regather in Jerusalem... it is time to start the work that brought them there.
 - E. Their two leaders were Jeshua and Zerubbabel.
 - 1. Jeshua was a priest.
 - 2. Zerubbabel was a governor.
 - a) I should say that Ezra the priest is not yet back from exile. There will be another wave of returnees. But that's not until chapter 7.
 - F. So the heroes are Jeshua and Zerubbabel. It is time to rebuild the temple.
 - G. But wait, before they do that, they have one even more important step to take. They "arose and built the altar of the God of Israel."
- VI. The Altar
- A. I want to say what this is, and then say what this means.
 - B. If you rewind back to before the temple was destroyed, and go all the way back when the temple was built by Solomon, this altar was there. But that was the second altar.
 - C. But we need to rewind back even further. We need to go back to Moses and the Jews. Moses built a portable place of worship. This was called the Tabernacle.
 - D. God told Moses the design of it. Moses told the builders. The builders built it. Solomon's temple would follow the same basic layout, only a permanent structure, not portable.
 - 1. *So, tabernacle by Moses, 1500 bc.*
 - 2. *First Temple by Solomon, 1000 bc.*
 - 3. *Second Temple by Zerubbabel and company, 500 bc.*
 - E. Each one had this altar. It was called the altar of burnt offering. This is basically a, (and I'm not trying to be disrespectful—I'm trying to communicate) it was basically a giant barbecue.
 - 1. The altar Moses built was five cubits square and three cubits high... and since a cubit is about 20 inches, it is 8 feet square and 5 feet high.
 - 2. The altar Solomon built was twenty cubits square and ten cubits high making it 30 feet square and 16 feet high.
 - a) That's quite a barbecue.
 - F. In each case, the box part of the altar was made of wood. Then all the wood was covered with brass (some alloy of copper).
 - 1. The design of this thing was to represent Jesus Christ. The wood symbolized his human nature. The bright shining brass symbolized his divine nature. And the reddish color of brass symbolized the blood that was shed for the people.
 - G. The altar of burnt offering stood in front of the Temple/Tabernacle. It was basically the first and biggest thing you saw when you entered the courtyard. It was right there in your face.
 - H. The Jews had five main kinds of offerings (see Leviticus). Each one has a different nuance of meaning, but they all add up to the same thing.
 - I. The only way a sinner can approach a holy God is through the death of either a) the sinner, or b) a substitute death on behalf of the sinner.
 - J. Verse 2 says they offered burnt offerings on this altar.
 - 1. Picture yourself as a worshipper bringing an animal to the altar. A long line, each with an animal sacrifice. When it is your turn, you bring your animal to the priest — many priests are working at the same time.
 - 2. The priest ties your sacrifice to the altar. The priest lays his hand on the head of the sacrifice. And you sacrifice the animal yourself.
 - 3. Why? Because sin had to be paid for and the payment is always death.
 - a) The grace here is that God is willing to accept the death of a sacrifice instead of the death of the sinner.
 - b) This is the core meaning of the whole system of sacrifices.
 - 4. The blood was sprinkled on the altar. The animal was cut up and mostly burned.
 - 5. And this went on all day long, and all night long, every day... the altar was always tended, and the sacrifices were always made.
 - K. When Zerubbabel and Jeshua built the altar, we're not sure what it was made of. There is some evidence it was made of big rocks, like a fire pit, though we can't be sure.
 - L. But it doesn't matter. What mattered was the shedding of blood to pay for sin, and to open the way to God.
- VII. What the Altar Means
- A. What is the altar all about? The altar is all about Jesus Christ and the gospel of grace he brings.
 - B. When the Jews built the altar first, they were restoring the main thing as the main thing first.
 - C. The altar was the in-your-face truth that...
 - 1. You are a sinner.
 - 2. You need a Savior.
 - 3. Christ is that Savior.
 - 4. He shed his blood.

5. The wrath of God was poured out on him.
 6. He paid the price.
 7. He was the sacrifice.
 8. He finished his work.
 9. Every sin committed was judged.
 10. Every judged sin was forgotten.
 11. God's holiness is honored.
 12. God's justice is satisfied.
 13. God's love is poured out.
 14. God's grace is legitimate.
 15. Heaven is opened.
 16. A sinner is forgiven.
 17. A saint is born.
 18. God and sinners reconciled.
 - a) *And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, (Hebrews 10:11, 12)*
 - b) *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)*
- D. The altar means that God does not create war in his own character to make peace with you.
- E. The altar was an in your face pronouncement that God's unchanging judgment for sin cannot be ignored. He must pour out condemnation on the ungodly.
- F. But in the sacrifice of Christ, that judgment finds completion, not in the death of the sinner but in the death of the substitute. The redness of the copper signifies the redness of the blood.
- G. God must judge sin. Any presentation of God which leaves this out presents a false God. And a false gospel. And a false grace.
- H. But in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, this fiercely relentless wrath of God is met with an equally relentless love and grace of the sinner.
 1. There, at the cross, is inflexible justice, falling in judgment on the Sinless but Sin-bearing Savior.
 2. And there, at the cross, is boundless love, falling on the lost sinner, coming to God in the name of Jesus by faith.
- I. When the Jews built the altar first, they were following the most important step of all in making a spiritual comeback.
 1. *Step 3: Restore the Core.*
- J. And the core is always Jesus and his saving work for you. Restore the core.
 1. They will rebuild the temple.
 2. They will rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.
 3. But they start with the altar.
 - a) The heart of kingdom is Jerusalem.
 - b) The heart of Jerusalem is the Temple.
 - c) The heart of the temple is the altar... along with the Ark.
 4. They restore the heart of the heart of the heart.
 - a) The heart of the Bible is Christ.
 - b) The heart of Christ is Grace.
 - c) The heart of Grace is the Cross.
- K. In our churches, we do not have an altar. This is a pulpit for preaching, not an altar for sacrificing.
- L. The only altar we know, and the only altar we need, is the cross on which Jesus died.
- M. And if you are a Christian, and you have strayed, or grown lukewarm, or apathetic about your faith, God is inviting you to come back to him... and the first stop on that comeback is the Cross.
 1. The first stop is remembering, reviewing, recalling to mind what happened on the world's worst/best day when Jesus shed his blood on the cross for you.
 2. This is not a return to emotion, though it may be emotional, or not.
 3. This is not a return to church alone, though church is always part of it.
 4. This is not a return to friends, and activities, and youth groups, and life groups.
- N. Above all else, it is a return to the best friend you've ever known, but have sadly been ignoring. Won't you come back to him today?

VIII. Conclusion

- A. One last thing.
 1. Ezra 3:1 says: *"the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem."*
- B. As one person. Integrated and whole.
- C. I started by talking about fragmentation. I started by talking about how we are divided among ourselves because we are divided within our selves.
- D. Only the altar of Jesus Christ has the power to bring peace in our hearts, and only the peace within our hearts can bring peace within our relationships and world.
- E. In Christ, in Christ crucified... this is where truth comes together, and broken hearts are mended, and broken relationships are healed, and broken world can be made hold.
- F. The Cross of Christ is what our fallen world so desperately needs, and so callously ignores.
- G. May God help us who belong to him to restore the core of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again.