

I. Introduction

- A. We have been looking in the Bible. Specifically, we have been looking at the book of Ezra in the Bible.
- B. And today, I would like to think with you about *Labels and Lies*.
- C. The Bible contains a huge collection of different styles of writing. You will find poems, epics, adventure stories, teaching materials, apocalypse (run for the hills), parables, history, prophecy... just about any style of literature you can imagine is in the Bible.
- D. When I am looking at a book in the Bible, like Ezra, I have several elements I am always looking for.
- E. The Book of Ezra tells a pretty simple story.
 - 1. God's people messed up.
 - 2. God's people made a comeback.
 - 3. God treated them better than they deserved.
 - 4. Repeat.
- F. That's not just the story of Ezra, is it? That probably sums up the story each of us could tell.
 - 1. I messed up.
 - 2. By grace, I made a comeback.
 - 3. God treated me better than I deserved.
 - 4. Repeat.
- G. Ezra is telling us about a certain period in the history of God's people, the Jews. So this is historical writing.
- H. But it's also more than that.
- I. Because, as a writer, Ezra is not just interested that we get our history straight. That is important, but it is not his main thing.
- J. Ezra is most interested that we get our theology right — that is, that we think true thoughts about God. And that we think true thoughts about how we live and interface with him.
 - 1. This book tells a story, so that is called *narrative*.
 - 2. This book tells the story of real people in a real place and time, 500 years before Christ, so that can be called *historical narrative*.
 - 3. But this book also lets us peek behind the veil. It lets us see what God is doing. It lets us see how God interacts with his people. So that can be called *theological-historical narrative*.
- K. But I want to go one more step. The reason I want to go one more step is because Ezra goes one more step.
 - 1. He is interested in crafting a good story. Yes (narrative).
 - 2. He is interested in crafting a good story that actually happened. Yes (historical narrative).
 - 3. He is interested in crafting a good story that actually happened in which God is the most important actor. Yes (theological-historical narrative).
 - a) But the one more step that I want us to take is the step that is super important in every single story of the Bible.
 - 4. Because Ezra is also interested in crafting a good story that actually happened in which God is the most important actor, while, at the same time, exploring the hearts and minds and attitudes and beliefs of the people in the story, so we can say why they acted the way they did. So let's throw spirituality and psychology on top of the heap.
 - a) There are narrative questions for us to ask.
 - b) There are historical questions for us to ask.
 - c) There are theological questions for us to ask.
 - d) There are psychological questions for us to ask.
- L. That's what makes the Bible so rich and profound.
 - 1. And that's what makes preaching so much fun.
- M. And I would also say that the thing that makes sermons most impactful is when the preacher can really connect the psychology of the hearers with the psychology of the story... because that's what makes people sit up and take notice.
- N. So, I'm going to read the last verse of Ezra 4, and let's think together about Labels and Lies.

II. *Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:24, NKJV).*

- A. Previously, in this story, God's people messed up. They were living such a good life that they forgot the reason for their good life. The reason was because they are honoring God and following his ways.
 - 1. But they stopped honoring God and following his ways, because, like I said, they messed up.
 - 2. They messed up so many times, their world fell apart.
 - 3. In recovery, this is called hitting rock bottom.
 - 4. Invading armies swept in. These armies destroyed their nation. These armies destroyed their cities, including Jerusalem. These armies destroyed the glorious, beautiful temple of Solomon, and plundered all its wealth.
 - 5. And then, these armies did the unthinkable. They drove God's own people out of the promised land and into exile. For almost 70 years, they have been in exile. They have been scattered throughout the empire of Persia. They are no longer a nation.
 - a) God's people messed up.
- B. But when the time was right, God turned it around. God stirred the heart, Ezra tells us, of King Cyrus of Persia. And Cyrus lifted the exile. He encouraged the Jews to go back home. He encouraged them to rebuild their temple. And he even offered to pay for it.
 - 1. So 47,000 Jews come back home to the promised land.
 - 2. For them, the exile is over.
 - a) God's people messed up.
 - b) God's people staged a comeback.

3. As I've been saying, all of this is good news for anybody who has gone far away from God.
 4. God is a God of second chances, and third chances, and seventy times seven chances until you lose count.
 5. The first thing they do, is to rebuild their altar. This is great. It is great because it sets the way of salvation front and center.
 6. The second thing they do is to lay the foundation of the temple. This is also great. It is great, because it sets their whole lives with God as top priority. Building the temple for them was the same thing as following the Grace Pathway for us. It means moving forward with God. Growing toward maturity. Getting up from the kiddie table, and joining the feast of grace with the grown ups.
 7. They lay the foundation of the temple, and it's a really big deal, with a big celebration. And lot and lots of joy.
 - a) God's people mess up.
 - b) God's people make a comeback.
 - c) God treats them better than they deserve.
 - C. About a minute and half later, they stop. Ezra 4:24 tells us so. It tells us that the work "ceased" and that it was "discontinued." In fact, it was discontinued for a couple of years.
 - D. Why do they stop? They stop because opposition shows up.
 - E. The neighbors complain to the guy from the permit office. The guy from the permit office heads over to the building site. He makes them stop.
 - F. And funny thing, they don't put up much of a fight. They drop their tools and head home and let the temple foundation just sit there.
 1. God's people mess up.
 2. God's people make a comeback.
 3. God treats them better than they deserve.
 4. Repeat.
 - G. So that's the story. That's the narrative.
 - H. Let's talk about labels for a minute. There are good labels, and there are bad labels inside your soul.
 1. Lesson 1 - Bad labels represent any self-defeating messages that are in your head that make you less than God calls you to be.
 - I. When the Jews faced opposition, and when they just stop and gave up on building, what labels would they be listening to?
 1. I'm a Quitter.
 2. I'm a Loser.
 3. I'm a Victim.
 4. I can't.
 - J. What labels might they be putting on God?
 1. God lets me down.
 2. God doesn't love me.
 3. God doesn't care.
 4. God is mean.
 - a) These are bad labels.
 - K. Now, let's talk about lies, and let's start by serving up a definition of truth.
 1. Lesson 2 - Truth is reality, as God sees it, God defines it, and God reveals it.
 - L. Truth is reality and reality flows from the heart and character and will of God.
 - M. All of these are lies, because when you label yourself with self-destructive labels, you are contradicting the labels God puts on you.
 - N. And when you label God as anything other than righteous, fair, loving and good, you are contradicting the reality of who he really is.
 1. Lesson 3 - Anything that contradicts God and his Word is a lie, by definition.
 - O. All of which is to say that if you want to not be crazy, you have to align your life with reality.
 - P. And if you want to align your life with reality, you have to align it with God's Word which speaks forth God's truth.
 - Q. But the people mess up, and they didn't believe God's truth, and the stopped working.
 - R. So God sent another dose of truth to them.
- III. *Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them. (Ezra 5:1, 2)*
- A. God sent them two awesome preachers. These were Haggai, and Zechariah, roughly the bad cop and the good cop.
 - B. We talked about them last time, so I won't repeat that.
 - C. I will just say that after two years of standing around, and not building the temple, God got them moving again with a healthy dose of truth. The two prophets were good cop/bad cop.
 1. Haggai was the bad cop. His basic message was YOU SHOULD.
 2. Zechariah was the good cop. His basic message was YOU CAN.
 - a) Lesson 4 - The only way to keep moving forward with God is to shed the bad labels and to quit believing the lies.
 - (1) You're not a quitter, you're a survivor. And as long as you're drawing breath, you'll stay in the game.
 - (2) You're not a loser, you're a champion. You might get knocked down, but you're never knocked out.
 - (3) You're not a victim. You are the invincible captain of your life under the mighty Lordship of Jesus Christ.
 - (a) Try those labels on for size.
 - (4) God never lets you down, he is faithful, and he's working a plan in and around you so glorious, it would take your breath away.

- (5) God never stops loving you, because if you could see him on even your worst days, you will see an infinite love pulsing from a heart of grace.
- (6) God never is mean to you, because he is righteous and fair, and you are sacred and precious to him. God doesn't mess with his people.
 - (a) *Lesson 5 - The two most important labels in your life are how you label yourself and how you label God. These labels create self-fulfilling prophecies.*
 - b) And the great burden of the Word of God is to heal your lifetime of messed up labels.
- 3. Which is exactly what the prophets do.
- D. So the people started building the temple again. And guess what happened a minute later...
- E. The guys from the building permit office showed up again. Only this time, it's the big boss.
- IV. *At the same time Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: "Who has commanded you to build this temple and finish this wall?" Then, accordingly, we told them the names of the men who were constructing this building. But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this matter. (Ezra 5:3-5)*
- A. If this sounds familiar, it's because it's the same thing that happened back in chapter 4.
 - 1. They start building the temple.
 - 2. Opposition shows up.
 - 3. They stop building the temple.
- B. So, God sends the prophets.
 - 1. The people shed the labels, quit believing the lies.
 - 2. They get back to work.
- C. And now they face opposition again, only this time it's at a higher level.
 - 1. But did you notice what happens?
 - 2. Did they stop? No.
 - 3. "They could not make them cease."
 - 4. I imagine a big argument. I imagine a shouting match.
 - 5. You can't make us stop, we do have a permit. King Cyrus himself.
 - a) Well, you better stop or else.
 - 6. You want us to stop? You're gonna have to shoot us.
 - a) Well, at least stop till we can get clarification.
 - 7. No way. Go ahead, send your letters. We're gonna keep on building our Temple.
- D. The permit guys didn't know what to do. They weren't used to this. They were used to everybody buckling before them. Which is exactly what the Jews did last time.
 - 1. *Lesson 6 - If you want to grow strong and mature in the Lord, you have to break the cycle of turning away from God.*
 - a) Yes, we're all for comebacks.
 - b) But it's best not to have to make a comeback at all, because you refused to turn away from God in the first place.
- E. You have to break the cycle of turning away from grace.
- F. You have to break the cycle of forgetting your Bible, setting aside prayer, skipping worship and instruction in the Word, and not fellowshiping with God's people.
- G. This time, for the first time in a long time, God's people broke the cycle of failure.
 - 1. I am victorious.
 - 2. I am under God's watchful care.
 - 3. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.
 - 4. No weapon formed against me shall prosper.
 - 5. God is faithful.
 - 6. I can count on him.
 - 7. God's love never fails.
 - 8. His mercies are new every morning.
 - 9. God's grace, right here, right now, is more than enough for me.
 - a) How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. (Psalms 36:7)
 - 10. God is all about delivering you from bad labels and reformatting the lies right out of your brain.
 - 11. Did you notice the beautiful phrase there at the beginning of verse 5?
 - a) But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease... (Ezra 5:5)
 - 12. What a cool phrase.
 - 13. The eye of their God was upon the elders (leaders) of the Jews...
 - 14. What does it mean to say God's eye is upon you?
 - a) Do you want to have a healthy label for God? Label him a God of perfect and gracious providence.
 - (1) *Lesson 7 - The Providence of God means that he is overseeing your life and your world to bring about incredible blessing for you, even as he brings about his perfect plans for history.*
 - b) I studied every time the Bible says God's eyes were on somebody... and you can organize them into four categories:
 - (1) *God is watching out for your protection. (2 Chronicles 16:9)*

- (a) *For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him... (2 Chronicles 16:9)*
- (2) *God is watching over you for provision. (Genesis 22:14)*
 - (a) *The Lord who sees is the Lord who provides. (Genesis 22:14)*
- (3) *God is watching you for evaluation. (Jeremiah 32:19)*
 - (a) *'You are great in counsel and mighty in work, for your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, to give everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings. (Jeremiah 32:19)*
 - (b) Under grace, he's not looking for the bad stuff, because he has already forgiven you.
 - (c) He's looking for the good stuff, because he wants to reward you with overflowing grace in this life, and mind-bending rewards in the life to come.
- (4) *God is watching you because you bring him joy. (Psalm 149:4, 147:11, 35:28; 1 Chronicles 29:11).*
 - (a) *The Lord takes pleasure in his people. Ps 149:4*
 - (b) *The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him. Ps 147:11*
 - (c) *The Lord takes pleasure in the prosperity of his servant. Ps 35:28*
 - (d) *The Lord takes pleasure in the upright. (1 Chron. 29:11).*
 - i) You know how happy you feel when you see your kid thrive?
 - ii) Multiply that by ten thousand when you think of God seeing you.
- c) They broke the cycle. They shattered the pattern of failure.
- d) They started with a faith in the providence of God, and they kept on following God in spite of opposition.
 - (1) When they labeled God correctly, they labeled themselves correctly.
 - (2) And the truth set them free.
- 15. There are some hearing me today who have lived the paradigm for so long, you don't know any other way:
 - a) God's people messed up.
 - b) God's people made a comeback.
 - c) God treated them better than they deserved.
 - d) Repeat.
- 16. On with God, off with God. On with church, off with church. On and off again and again. Spiritual growth. The Grace Pathway. The Bible. Prayer.
 - a) It's time for you to break the cycle. It's time for you to shatter the pattern of failure.
 - (1) You should. And you can.
 - (a) You can walk with God, because the minute you start, he takes your hand again, and he will never let you fall.
- 17. There's one more lesson today about labels and lies.
- 18. It's tucked into the letter Tattenai sent to King Darius.
- 19. First he tells the king the situation.
- 20. Then he asks them what gives them the rights to build this temple.
- 21. Then he records what they say:
- V. *And thus they returned us an answer, saying: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and completed. But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon. However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to build this house of God. (Ezra 5:11-13)*
 - A. Why did their kingdom get destroyed?
 - B. Why did they get sent into exile?
 - C. Why did their temple get demolished?
 - D. Why had all these bad things happened to them?
 - 1. "Because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath..."
 - E. They took full responsibility. We did this. We brought this on ourselves. No excuses. No evasions. No one to blame.
 - F. We spit on God, and he pulled the rug out from underneath us. But it was always his rug, and we never deserved it in the first place.
 - 1. *Lesson 8 - You never find your abundant life, until you take one hundred percent ownership for the quality of your life, without excuses, without blaming, and without shading the truth.*
 - G. God doesn't subsidize a self-destructive life.
 - H. What a testimony this is.
 - 1. The Persians worshipped the God of Heaven.
 - 2. The Jews said they worshipped the God of Heaven and Earth.
 - I. The Persians believed in multiple gods. They believed that the exile of Jews was a failure on the part of the God of the Jews.
 - J. But the Jews said, our trouble wasn't because of God's failure, it was because of God's purpose. And if you were really honest, you'd be worshipping our God too.
- VI. Conclusion
 - A. It takes a while, but a letter comes back from the king. And if you think you know grace, that letter will show amazing grace.
 - B. But we'll have to look at that next time.
 - 1. Prayer for deliverance from lies.
 - 2. Prayer for removal of bad labels.
 - 3. Prayer for a life of grace and truth.