

I. Introduction

- A. ...Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. (Ezra 7:6)
- B. When our kids were little, we had this legendary thing called a “toy box.” I call it legendary because it really wasn’t a factual toy box. It was more a hopeful toy box. It was a toy box wannabe. At any given time, what percentage of toys do you think actually ever made it into the toy box?
- C. Statistically, zero. That’s why it was our legendary toy box.
- D. The actual toy box was every room in the house. Do you know what I’m talking about?
- E. Every floor surface. Every table top. Every shelf had a doll, a book, a transformer, a work of art, a lego structure, a stuffed animal. They were taking over.
- F. You know you’re a parent when you’ve stepped on Legos with bare feet.
- G. Left unchecked, the mess will take over. This is a life-principle.
 - 1. Without intervention, disorder grows.
 - 2. Without intervention, chaos reigns.
- H. Scientists actually have a term for this: *Entropy*.
 - 1. Things grow old, wear out, run down, and fall apart.
 - 2. As time marches forward, so does disorder. So does randomness. So does chaos.
- I. Unless there is an intervention... unless one day you psych yourself up and you exert the massive energy clean up of all the toys, and put them all in the toy box... Unless there is an intervention, entropy reigns, and systems fall apart.
 - 1. The difference between a patch of weeds and a garden is the gardener who tends it well.
- J. In the normal course of affairs, without intervention, without intention, without attention, without care and tending... two words describe our lives and our world:
 - 1. *Mess Happens*
- K. The only way to turn that around is intervention. Repeated intervention. Determined intervention.
- L. I’d like to invite you to think with me today on the topic of:

II. Grace Intervention

- A. Because entropy is at work in our spiritual lives too. Any person who does not tend and maintain their spirit, winds up with a patch of weeds where a fruitful orchard could grow (Psalm 1).
- B. Since September, we have turned our hearts toward a book in the Bible called Ezra.
- C. Ezra tells the story of a spiritual comeback. Actually, we’re going to see it tells the story of a repeated spiritual comeback.
 - 1. The time is around 500 years before Christ.
 - 2. The place is Israel and Judah.
 - 3. The People are God’s people.
 - 4. The situation is exile.
 - a) God’s people had been in the promised land for centuries. That was awesome. When they maintained the spirits, life was good. When they kept their hearts warm and tender toward Christ, when they prayed, when they applied their minds to Scripture, when they turned their hearts to God, when they used their hands for the Savior and his gospel... life was very, very good.
 - b) They lived truly blessed lives. God-blessed lives. They were at peace. Secure. Prosperous.
 - c) But then entropy kicked in. Entropy took over their relationship with God and then with each other
 - (1) At first they grew complacent.
 - (2) Complacency turned into neglect.
 - (3) Neglect turned into indifference.
 - (4) Indifference turned into callousness.
 - (5) Callousness turned into disobedience.
 - (6) Disobedience turned into forsaking the God who blessed their lives.
 - (a) And from there, it was only a short hop to using and exploiting each other.
 - (b) It was a mess, because without intervention, Mess Happens.
- D. The consequences were catastrophic.
- E. God had his hand of protection upon them, but they told God they didn’t want it. And one thing you have to know about God:
 - 1. *God loves you too much to subsidize your self-destructive ways.*
 - 2. So he lifted his hand of blessing from his own people.
- F. Foreign armies rolled in. They destroyed their nation, destroyed their city, destroyed their temple, and sent the people out from the Promised Land and into forced exile into the nations around them.
 - 1. *A chaotic inner world is the natural result of turning away from God, and is a wake-up call to return to him.*
- G. This is where the Comeback comes in.

III. The Comeback

- A. After 70 years in exile, it’s time to come home. After 70 years, the exile is lifted. And the Jews come back to their heritage. They come home.
- B. This isn’t easy. The nation is in ruins, but they come back anyway. They rebuild their homes. They rebuild their altar. They rebuild their temple. They rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

- C. They restart their lives with God.
- D. This is awesome. It's a do-over. It's an intervention. It is the end of spiritual chaos. The end of emotional disorder. The end of relationship dysfunction.
- E. The physical comeback of Ezra 1-6 matches a spiritual comeback, and it's awesome.
- F. By the end of chapter six, the people have returned to God. It's the end of disobedience. The softening of the callous toward God. They reverse their indifference. They end their neglect. They drive complacency from their own hearts.
- G. They now have a temple. They have priests. They are worshipping God the way he wants to be worshipped. They are following God's Word. They apply his ordinances. They are conscious of their blessings. They are enjoying the Promised Land. They are tending their fields and enjoying its fruit. They wouldn't trade places with anybody.
- H. Life is good. The blessing of God has returned.
- I. It's awesome.
- J. But time went on, and guess what happened.
- K. Entropy.
- L. Entropy happened.
- M. One by one, the toys came out of the toy box, and nobody put them back in. Little by little, Mess Happened. Right back to complacency, neglect, indifference, callousness and disobedience.
 - 1. From Ezra chapter 1 to chapter 7, about 80 years have gone by.
 - 2. From Ezra chapter 6 to chapter 7, about 56 years have gone by.
- N. Over that time, spiritual entropy has taken over, again.
- O. The temple is up and running, but it's neglected.
 - 1. The priesthood is functioning, but it's superficial.
 - 2. They offer their sacrifices and pray their prayers, but it's meaningless. Functional to them. Not from the heart.
- P. They're not quite back where they started, but they're heading there.

IV. Entropy

- A. Might I press pause on the Ezra story for a minute to talk about us.
 - 1. *There's no standing still in our spiritual lives.*
- B. I've been a pastor for a very long time. I am in the business of people's spiritual lives. My spiritual life. Your spiritual life. Our community and our culture.
- C. What is the biggest challenge to people moving forward with God? What is the biggest enemy to my work?
 - 1. I can tell you, it isn't the devil.
 - 2. It isn't temptation.
 - 3. It isn't addiction, or dysfunction, or the flesh, or the world.
 - 4. All of those things are tough to deal with, but they're not really the core challenge.
- D. The biggest challenge is entropy.
- E. The biggest challenge is what a mathematician would call "regression to the mean."
 - 1. Which is a fancy way of saying this:
 - a) *The biggest challenge to our spiritual lives is the tendency to keep sliding back into our old, mildly satisfying sense of normal.*
- F. Toys all over the floor is normal. You can clean them up, but they keep coming back. But it's okay. You get used to it. You just live with it.
- G. But you can't keep living with it...
- H. Because entropy says that all problems grow bigger with time, and very gradually, almost imperceptibly, that mildly satisfying, okay "normal" disintegrates unsatisfying, and dissatisfying, and painful, and then broken.
 - 1. In January, you start a Bible reading plan. In February, you've fizzled out. In March, you're crossing moral boundaries you swore you wouldn't cross.
 - 2. In January, you're in a Life Group... you're going to Starting Point... you're on the Grace Pathway. But in March, your kids are in sports, and life's too busy for God.
 - 3. And that's when entropy takes over.
 - a) The downward pressure.
 - b) The pressure that pulls us away from God.
 - c) The tendency toward spiritual decay and moral disorder.
 - 4. And that's the biggest challenge for all of us today. That's the enemy that opens the door to every other enemy.
 - a) Which is exactly where so many Christians are today.
 - b) And which is exactly where the people of God were back in Ezra's day.
- I. So many of the gains they made were lost. No, they're not back where they started, but they are almost there.
 - 1. Eighty years ago, 43,000 people returned home from exile.
 - 2. Fifty-six years ago, they finished their temple, and restored their hearts with God.
 - 3. And now they're just about back where they started.
 - 4. So what happens?
 - 5. God stages an intervention.
 - 6. And all of that brings us to Ezra 7.

V. God's Grace Intervention

- A. *Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest-- this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. (Ezra 7:1-6)*
- B. The Grace Intervention comes in the form of a man.
- C. Ezra. What do we know about him?
1. *He is a priest.* Back the days before Christ, that meant he had access to God that normal people didn't have. The priest's job was to use that access to connect other people to God too.
 2. *He can trace his ancestry back to Aaron.* Aaron was the first chief priest of Israel, a thousand years earlier. That becomes really important later.
 3. *Ezra is also a skilled scribe.* A scholar, an expert, highly trained interpreter and guardian of the Sacred Scriptures.
 - a) And, most importantly...
 4. Ezra, the Jewish scribe, is ridiculously favored by Artaxerxes, the Persian king. We'll see that more in the next section. But there is one line I really want you to notice.
 - a) *"according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him" (Ezra 7:6).*
 5. I did a little study on the hand of someone.
 - a) The Bible talks about...
 - (1) A slack hand... laziness.
 - (2) An open hand... generosity.
 - (3) A high hand... arrogance, rebelliousness.
 - (4) Putting the hand to... hard work.
 - (5) Stretching out the hand... attack or longing.
 - (6) Being under the hand... submission.
 - (7) In one's hand... possession.
 - (8) Having the hand upon... intervention, or special action.
 - b) At heart, the hand represents the power and will to act. When Ezra said that God's hand was upon him, he was saying that God had set his intention and power to act on his behalf.
 - c) You have the same phrase again, in verse 9, and then again down in the last verse of the chapter (v. 28).
 - d) Here in the midst of a generation of crazy believers, whose lives are going backwards, you have God himself performing an intervention through the life of a scholar, priest, and scribe named Ezra.
 - e) Hold that thought.
- D. *Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. (Ezra 7:7-9)*
- E. So, all these people have come of age in exile, in Persia.
1. But now, at long last, they return to the Promised Land too.
 - a) In chapter 1, you have the first wave of God's people coming home... About 43,000 strong.
 - b) In chapter 7, you have the second wave of God's people coming home, a small wave only about 9,000 strong (1,500 males plus women and children).
 - c) In the next book of the Bible, Nehemiah, you will find a third wave of God's people coming home.
 2. Their journey took them four months. Four months on foot to a home that wasn't ready for them.
 3. That's faith.
 4. The next verse shows us the heart of a man completely determined to not let entropy dominate his life.
- F. *For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10)*
1. We are talking about entropy. We are talking about chaos and disorder in your inner world.
 2. And this is the secret weapon to combat it.
 3. The Law of the Lord. The Word of God. The Holy Bible.
 - a) *The Word of God, consistently taken in, gives you a new normal, more radiant and joyful than you ever imagined before.*
 4. When you take in food, your body assimilates it. The nutrients become part of you, and they give you strength to act in the world.
 5. When you take in the Word of God, your inner person assimilates it. God's truth becomes part of you — your thinking, your opinions, your instincts, your emotions, your psychology — and God's truth gives you strength to act in the world.
 - a) *When you set your heart to seek God through the pages of Scripture, your whole life becomes a weapon of Grace Intervention in the lives and circumstances around you.*
 6. Only this heart can stand against the unceasing flow of decay and entropy in our world.
 - a) Somebody's got to take a stand.
 - b) Only a person of the Book can take that stand.
 - c) And once you do, the hand of God rests upon you to bless everybody you know.
 7. Want proof?

- G. *This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel: Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth. (Ezra 7:11, 12)*
1. This is an ancient historical document. It was prepared by King Artaxerxes of Persia. It was given to Ezra, scribe of Judah who was in exile.
 2. It is absolutely remarkable. I won't read it all now, but it is 15 verses long.
 3. In this letter, King Artaxerxes gives Ezra remarkable authority:
 - a) Permission to lead anybody who wants to, of their own free will, to leave exile and go back to their ancestral home of Jerusalem (v13).
 - b) Authorization to carry along a rare and valuable copy of the Law of God (v14).
 - c) Freewill cash gifts given by Jews and Persians, and members of the royal court alike (v15,16).
 - d) Instructions to use some of the money to purchase animals to make offerings to the God of heaven on the altar in Jerusalem (v17).
 - e) Liberty too spend the rest of the money as Ezra sees fit (v18).
 - f) More articles of gold and silver to deliver to the temple (v19).
 - g) Literally, anything Ezra needs to be paid for out of the king's treasury (v20).
 - h) Orders for all the royal representatives in the vicinity to help Ezra and the Jews diligently in whatever they ask (v21).
 - i) A budget out of the treasury (v22).
 - j) Authorization to ask for anything else to repair and beautify the temple (v23).
 - k) Tax exemption for priests and ministers (v24).
 - l) Authority for Ezra to be fully in charge (v25).
 - m) And the use of law and force to effect all these stipulations, even up to death (v26).
 4. This is a Grace Intervention.
 5. This is a remarkable move of God for the blessing of his people.
 6. And all of this was given to Ezra, in Persia, 4 months before the people in Jerusalem even knew he was coming!
 7. They were back at home.
 8. They were neglecting the Temple, forgetting the Bible, ignoring their God, and wandering from his ways.
 9. Mess Happens.
 10. But Grace Happens too.
- H. *Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and has extended mercy [hesed, grace] to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me. (Ezra 7:27, 28)*
1. Where did the king get this idea? The Lord put it in his heart.
 - a) *With a heart devoted to God, and a mind devoted to Scripture, even the humblest child of God can bring a Grace Intervention to those who need it most.*
 2. That is what Ezra did.
 3. That is what any one of us can do as well.
 4. So God motivates this king. And the king writes this decree and he hands it to Ezra... and Ezra can't help but praise the Lord.
 5. In case you were wondering, earthly kings come and go, and that is never a problem for the Lord.
 6. Ezra said that the Lord extended grace to him. A grace intervention. This Grace Intervention came in the form of the edict of a king.
 7. But it can come in a lot of different forms.
 8. I remember one time when I was in high school, my brother and I came home really late on a Saturday night. After midnight.
 9. The next morning, Sunday morning, my dad did something unusual. He came into our bedroom and woke us up.
 10. He said, "Get up. You're going to church."
 11. See, we weren't going to church, because we were tired. We were planning to sleep in.
 12. And the ironic thing is that my Dad didn't even go to church. He wasn't even a Christian.
 13. But that day, he was a means of Grace to us, because I am very sure that God wanted us at church that day, even if my dad wasn't about to go.
- I. Do you know what the Grace Intervention looks like?
1. Getting your kids out of bed, packing into the car, and heading to church. Every week. That's an intervention against entropy.
 2. Turning off YouTube, or Hulu, or clicking away from Reddit and Instagram, and spending 15 minutes in Scripture and prayer. That's an intervention against entropy.
 3. Feeling tempted, and calling your sponsor, and getting to a meeting. That's an intervention against entropy.
 4. Switching up your schedule to get yourself to the next Grace Pathway course, or to youth group, or young adults, or a missions trip, or anything done in the Name of Jesus.
- J. There will always be reasons to do anything other than Bible study, fellowship, Life Group, worship, and the Grace Pathway.
- K. The flow of entropy always runs downhill.
- L. But with the Word of God, and the grace of God, you can bring order to your inner world, even when your outer world is in chaos.
- M. We'll see how that happens next time.