

I. Introduction

- A. The title of my talk today is *The Secret Decoder Ring*.
- B. There's a great scene in the movie Christmas Story where Ralphie, a little kid, receives his long awaited Secret Decoder Ring.
- C. This isn't just any secret decoder ring. It's the secret decoder ring from Little Orphan Annie's Secret Circle.
- D. I remember as a kid, the whole idea of a secret decoder ring was awesome. Roy Rogers. Johnny Quest. I know I'm sounding old. But Secret Decoder rings... that was a really cool thing.
- E. So Ralphie gets his Annie's Secret Circle Decoder Ring, and he tunes in to the next broadcast. At the end, the announcer reads off the secret, encoded message.
- F. Ralphie writes it down... 12, 11, 8, 2, 5, 14, 11, 11, 23, 21, 3, 25... He carefully writes it all down.
 - 1. Ralphie is super excited. He runs into a private room, and gets to work. He spins the dial on his decoder ring. He decodes the message... one exciting letter at a time.
 - a) B...E... S...U...R...E... T... O
 - (1) The fate of the planet might hang in the balance....
 - (2) What was it? Be sure to what?
 - (3) What was the secret message?
 - (4) It was so exciting... At long last, the message was decoded. What did it say?
 - (a) Be sure to drink your Ovaltine.
 - 2. So, for Ralphie, that was a total let down. It was just a commercial for the show's sponsor.
- G. Why do I bring this up?
- H. Because tucked into our place in the Bible today, is the secret decoder ring for all of our lives.
- I. One verse, implanted into the middle of a world-changing story, that unlocks the secret of life, the secret of the good life, the secret of our purpose, our origin, our destiny, our mission, and the way of life for anyone who seeks a God-blessed life.
- J. Let's get into that story, and I'll back-fill info as we go.

II. *Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. (Ezra 8:21, NKJV)*

- A. The time is 500 BC. The place is just outside of Babylon.
- B. The situation is a little complicated. For over a century now, the Jews were exiled from the promised land. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel are destroyed. God's people are scattered throughout the nations. At the time of this book, they are under the rule of the Persian empire.
 - 1. They have homes, and business, and families and farms everywhere but home. Everywhere but the promised land. And they begin to wonder if God's promises really are true.
 - 2. But when this book begins, they start to go back home. The exile is lifted, and Ezra tells the story of a world-class comeback.
- C. In chapter one, the first wave of exiles returns home. This is about 43,000 people, a small number out of the millions of Jews worldwide. This small remnant rebuilds the temple of Solomon which had been destroyed. They rebuild the altar. And they restart the sacrifices that had been ceased for two generations.
- D. Here in chapter 8, a second wave of exiles prepares to journey home. This wave only has 7 or 8,000 people. It is led by a priest named Ezra. Ezra will wind up being one of the most influential leaders ever in the history of the Jews.
 - 1. These pilgrims will travel from Babylon to Jerusalem. Before they begin their epic trek, the people rendezvous at a river. This happens about 3 days out of Babylon.
 - 2. We saw last time, that they made sure all the tribes of Israel were represented. Now, it's time to head into an uncertain future; it's time to head home.
 - 3. But we have two important items of preparation.
 - a) First... Ezra proclaims a fast.
 - (1) Let me come right out and say it.... I hate fasting. I do not like it. I do not do well with it. If I have a blood test or any medical test that requires fasting, I'm a totally unhappy camper.
 - (2) Same thing goes for religious fasting. This is not part of my normal spiritual life. You can think of me whatever you want, but good food is my love language, and fasting just isn't my thing.
 - b) But... like it or not, there are times when fasting is important.
 - 4. Before they launched their pilgrimage, Ezra proclaimed a fast.
- E. What does that mean? It basically means, hey everybody. Today, skip your dinner, and gather together, and pray. Praying for this journey is more important than eating for this journey.
- F. And he specifies two things to pray for: a) to humble ourselves before God, and b) to ask God to guide us along the right way.
 - 1. So, here's a term I think will come in handy to understand this. I would call this, a "pattern interrupt."
 - 2. The term comes from behavioral psychology, and from neuro-linguistic programming. I'm not advocating everything in those disciplines, so don't email me... I'm just picking up this term. What does this mean?

- G. Scientists suggest we all have about 50-100,000 thoughts per day. To make all this mental work more efficient, our minds organize our thoughts around routines. We spend very little energy on our routines.
 - 1. So, when you drive to work or school, you go on autopilot. You're spending very little effort on every turn and every maneuver. It's a routine.
 - 2. We have routines in our relationships too. How you come home at the end of your day is a routine. How you head out the door in the morning is a routine. How you say hello, how you say good bye.
 - a) The *value* of these routines is that you don't spend a lot of effort thinking about them.
 - b) The *danger* of these routines is that you don't spend a lot of effort thinking about them.
 - (1) You have conditioned responses that can either help you or hurt you as time goes by.
 - (2) And most of these routines are unconscious. We hardly even know we have developed them.
 - (a) And that's why, every so often, it's really important that you break the routine and do something different. This break in routine is a pattern interrupt.
 - H. Your relationship with God can easily become one of your routines. Church, small group, Bible, pray, ministry activity, repeat.
 - I. That's helpful. That's cool. But once in a while, you need a pattern interrupt.
 - J. Fasting is a pattern interrupt. It's away of saying, Wake up. This is important. Pay attention. Get out of your daydream. Get out of your pattern. Notice this.
 - 1. The prophets of Israel were constantly issuing pattern interrupts to the Jews. You think because you're doing these sacrifices that God is pleased. Well, if your heart is far from him, he isn't pleased.
 - 2. Jesus did this same thing. The routines of religion meant nothing to him, and he said so, and the Jews crucified him for it.
 - K. When Ezra called for a fast, he was saying, This moment is not business as usual. Unless we wrap our hearts and minds around the grace of God, we will be stuck in the same old routines that got us exiled in the first place.
 - 1. *Lesson 1: The routines of your walk with God need a periodic shot in the arm to keep from becoming unthinking and stale.*
 - L. Fasting. A retreat. A new volunteer role. A new prayer journal. New depths of study (Veritas, for instance). Something to break out of your normal routine, and recharge your life with God.
 - M. Ezra calls for a fast. And then he gives the bottom line reason for this fast.
- III. *For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him." So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer. (Ezra 8:22, 23)*
- A. Ezra and the gang are traveling from Babylon to Jerusalem. They have a massive caravan. It's like a scene from Arabian Nights. Kids running around. Animals. Tents. Barbecues. Noise. It's a festival atmosphere, here at the rendezvous.
 - B. But in three days, when they begin their journey, it's nothing but danger. Travel in those days could be harsh. Wandering tribes, heavily armed and fortified, could swoop in at a moment's notice. Ezra knew the dangers.
 - C. He also knew that King Artaxerxes would give him a detachment of soldiers, if only he asked. But at this moment, and for this purpose, Ezra was unwilling to ask.
 - D. He would rather ask God for protection than ask the Persian king for protection. Is this a general principle?
 - E. No. There are times to ask for help, times to ask for protection, times to ask for aid, times to ask for assistance, times to ask for medical treatment, times to ask for counseling.
 - 1. You don't have to be hyper spiritual and refuse an offer of help, because "God will provide."
 - 2. Yes, God will provide, and sometimes, he provides through a lot of different channels.
 - a) For example, when the next wave of Jews returns home, in Nehemiah 2, Nehemiah asks the Persian king for exactly this kind of intervention. So this is not telling you to always turn down human help because God is your helper.
 - F. It is saying, however, that in this particular place, based on this particular moment, Ezra decide to turn down the pagan king's help for the journey. Why?
 - G. Because of the core fact of reality that the priest of the Jews, Ezra, told the King of the Pagans Artaxerxes.
 - H. What is that core reality?
 - 1. *"The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."*
 - I. Ezra admits of a desire to ask of human protection, but he realizes something. He realizes that to do so would undermine his testimony to the king.
 - J. And this is his testimony. This is his message.
 - 1. And this, is the secret decoder ring to the book of Ezra.
 - 2. And it is the secret decoder ring to the story of your life and mine.
 - a) *The hand of our God...* the activity of God in your life in real time...
 - b) *Is upon all those for good....* The activity of God in your life in real time is bringing about something good.
 - (1) He is bringing about good when you feel it.
 - (2) He is bringing about good when you don't feel it.

- (3) He is adding to your experience of grace.
- (4) He is expanding your capacity for grace.
- (5) He is enlarging your appreciation of grace.
- (6) He is jockeying circumstances, directing the decisions of others, guiding, shepherding, and arranging all the people, all the factors, all the events that come to play in your life for good...
 - (a) And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28, NASB)
- (7) The hand of our God is upon all those for good...

c) *Who seek him...* What does it mean to seek the Lord? It means to look for him in everyday life.

- (1) *Lesson 2: To seek the Lord means to so deepen your knowledge of him by the Word (mind), and your obedience to him in everyday life (will), that you create an ever-deepening bond of affection with him in your soul (emotions). To seek the Lord is to set spiritual maturity as a top priority in your life.*
- (2) When this describes you, you are a person who seeks the Lord. And the head of our God is upon all those for good who seek him.
- (3) It's a fundamental reality of life.
 - (a) Does this mean that only good things will happen to you?
 - (b) No. God never promised that.
 - (c) But it means that no matter what happens to you, in you, or around you, God will bring about good you never saw coming.
- (4) The flip side of this is stated in the next part.

d) *But his power and wrath...* What is the wrath of God?

- (1) *A.W. Pink said, The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of Divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin.*
- (2) A.W. Tozer:
 - (a) *Since God's first concern for His universe is its moral health, that is, its holiness, whatever is contrary to this is necessarily under His eternal displeasure. To preserve His creation God must destroy whatever would destroy it. When He arises to put down iniquity and save the world from irreparable moral collapse, He is said to be angry. Every wrathful judgment in the history of the world has been a holy act of preservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of the creation are inseparably united. God's wrath is His utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates iniquity as a mother hates the polio that take the life of her child. (The Knowledge of the Holy)*
- (3) Translation: God hates the the force that breaks your heart. He comes down on the head of evil with punishment and destruction. He destroys the destroyer. He punishes the pain machine. He pays back the evil doer with what they have coming.
 - (a) If you subtract the wrath of God, you subtract justice from the story of the cosmos.
 - (b) If you erase the wrath of God, then evil wins in the end.
 - (c) If you hate the wrath of God, then you hate the one force in the universe that makes the bad guys shudder to meet their maker.
- i) A century ago, A.W. Pink wrote these prophetic words:
 - (1) *It is sad to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or at least they wish there were no such thing. While some would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the Divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight, they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. (The Attributes of God)*
- (d) Ezra said, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath
- (4) *...are against all those who forsake Him.*" This is the law of life. Like the law of gravity, you can fight it but you just can't win.

(a) What does it mean to forsake God?

i) To forsake God means the opposite of seeking him.

- (1) You don't fill your mind with a deeper knowledge of him through his word.
- (2) You don't align your will with God's truth, and it shows in your words, thoughts, and actions.
- (3) And you don't create any kind of bond with God in your emotions or your soul, except some kind of feeble sentimental notions of a heavenly grandfather too nice to care about anybody's misbehavior.

3. "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."

a) This is the secret decoder ring for life.

K. But it raises a question. Can the wrath of God come down on the head of a person who has been saved?

1. Hasn't Jesus already satisfied the wrath of God on my behalf?

- a) Yes he has, so no it can't.
- L. We have to think of the wrath of God in two ways:
 - 1. *JUDICIAL WRATH, which is God as judge punishing those who do evil.*
 - a) This is condemnation from the justice of God, and a balancing of the scales of justice. Judicial wrath applies to unsaved people only.
 - b) But God's people can never by any possibility be punished for their sins. God has punished them already. When Jesus died on the Cross, the wrath of God for all my sins was laid on him. He was my substitute. Judicial wrath can never apply to you if you are saved.
 - c) But there's a second way of understanding God's wrath:
 - 2. *PATERNAL TOUGH LOVE, which is God as father bringing to bear on your life whatever it takes to bring you to your senses so you come back home to him.*
 - a) Think of the prodigal son. Think of the Jews of Ezra's day.
 - b) God says to his people, "I will never break my covenant with you" (Jud 2:1).
 - c) And he never did and he never will. But, when God's people forsake him, life is always harder than it needs to be. Because any child of God who forsakes God, will become the object of Paternal Tough Love... And you should be thankful, because the New Testament says this is a sign of his love for you (Heb. 12:6).
- IV. *"The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."* (Ezra 8:22b)
 - A. This is the secret decoder ring to all of life.
 - B. This is the key.
 - C. This is the simple principle that makes sense of everything.
 - D. This is why the Jews were in trouble. This is why the exile. Why the destruction of Jerusalem. Why the toppling of their magnificent Temple. Why the dispersion from the Promised Land. Why the flag of Babylon, and then Persia, and then Greece, and then Rome flew over Jerusalem.
 - E. But this is also why Ezra and the pilgrims could be confident.
 - F. In fasting, they had turned their hearts back to God. Yes, it's a one time shot in the arm, but it's the beginning of a daily pursuit of God. A daily seeking of God, mind will and emotions. And that daily routine would make the difference between a safe and an unsafe journey home.
 - 1. *Lesson 3: The believer in Jesus who is growing in the Lord can have every confidence in a God-blessed life.*
 - G. Ezra was confident enough to refuse a detachment of troops. He knew he was seeking the Lord, and that's what mattered most.
 - 1. A God-blessed life isn't for sale.
 - 2. It is the overflow of a heart filled with grace.
 - H. The biggest thing on display here is this:
 - 1. *Lesson 4: A God blessed life is an indisputable testimony to the faithfulness, goodness, sovereignty, power, and grace of God in the world.*
 - I. Last week my message was Come along. Whoever you are, whatever you're going through, we're going to the Promised land of grace and a God blessed life. Come along.
 - J. This week my message is that the voices saying Come Along are most powerful when backed up by a life that is seeking the Lord.
 - K. May that be our testimony as a church and as joint heirs of all the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ.