

SERMONS ON EZRA

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Peter Leach

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Christ and His Church (Ezra 1)

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. It's there in this passage like a drumbeat, Jerusalem. The God who is in Jerusalem, the house which is in Jerusalem, from Babylonia to Jerusalem, over and over. Right off the bat, the book of Ezra leaves you in no doubt what its about. Jerusalem, the city of God, the place where God dwells. And of course the Old Testament Jerusalem is a picture, a pattern, a shadow of the New Testament reality, the church of God. This little book is all about the church.

Some of us will be new to the book of Ezra, most of us could do with a refresher, so let me just introduce it briefly. Ezra comes about 500 years before Jesus, which, because there's a gap, makes it one of the last books in the Old Testament in terms of timeline. It pretty much goes, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi maybe, long pause, New Testament. And the background to Ezra, the crucial background, is the exile. 70 years earlier, after centuries of Israel's wickedness and God's patience, his judgement finally fell, Jerusalem was destroyed, wall torn down, temple torn down, fire everywhere, people slaughtered and the survivors carted off to Babylon in chains. For 70 years, give or take, Jerusalem has been a ruin. And the book of Ezra charts the first steps of those exiles back to the land, back to Jerusalem. It's a book of small beginnings, of two steps forward one step back. But although the events in Ezra are quite small, the things they picture are very big. Ezra is a book where God shows us in miniature what he is going to do with his church.

It's probably fair to say that Ezra is not one of the most travelled books in the Bible. And there are a number of reasons for that, but I wonder whether one of them might be that we struggle to care very much about the church. In our individualistic culture, perhaps in our theological tradition as evangelicals, the church of God can easily be neglected, can't it. We get very excited about our individual salvation, the individual promise of heaven; perhaps the idea of the church of God doesn't seem as immediately important.

Well, if that's you, I hope the book of Ezra will be a real help, as it rubs our noses in God's plan for his church week after week. When I say church, by the way, I don't first of all mean Christ Church Derby or any individual congregation or even denomination like our IPC. I mean *the* church, the one church of God, spread through the whole world and down through history, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, and we in Christ Church Derby are just one small part of that glorious reality.

I've got three things to see from Ezra 1 this morning. None of them rocket science, but I hope each a blessing to us. First, Christ builds his church. Second, Christ gives his church gifts. And third, Christ dwells in his church. We'll spend longest on our first point, then do the second more briefly, and finally whizz really fast through the third.

1. Christ Builds His Church

Verse 1: "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia". Cyrus, the great king, ruler of Persia which means at that point ruler of pretty much everything worth ruling, the greatest empire on earth and the greatest empire the world has yet seen. Cyrus makes a proclamation. And the

proclamation he makes is a pretty big deal. If you turn back one page in your Bibles and look at the very end of the book of 2 Chronicles, that last little section, the Proclamation of Cyrus. Verse 22, “now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia”. And it goes on. These last few sentences of Chronicles are the same as the first few sentences of Ezra. When something is repeated in the Bible, that’s a little flag to pay extra attention. When something comes at the very start or very end of a book, that’s a little flag to pay extra attention. So this decree is a pretty big deal.

Back in Ezra. Let’s have a look at it. Verse 2. “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.”

Now you might go, pretty standard Bible stuff, but don’t miss how utterly remarkable this is. As far as most people in the ancient world can see, the God of Israel is a God of a little country that has been wiped off the map. His covenant name, the LORD – when you get it in all caps like that in the Bible, that’s the translation for Yahweh, God’s personal name, like other gods might be called Zeus or Thor or whatever, the true God is called Yahweh, the God who is. And in all the world, only Israel worshipped him, and now Israel has been wiped off the map, and that kind of makes him look bad. This is not the point where you expect anyone else to start praising Yahweh. And yet here’s Cyrus, the single most powerful person in the world, a pagan king, going, Yahweh is the God of heaven, and he’s the one who put me where I am, and he’s given me a job to do and I’m doing it. What a *remarkable* sign of God’s power, don’t you think? It’s one thing for him to make Israel big and beefy so that other nations take notice. It’s another thing for him to go, right at the point when my people are at their very lowest, let’s get the pagan emperor to announce my glory to the whole world.

If you want to know how God did that, well, do go read the book of Daniel, you get some insight into how God deals with and reveals himself to the kings in Babylon during the exile. And you might go and read Isaiah 44 and 45 as well, where over a hundred years before Cyrus, God actually predicts Cyrus by name and talks to him. Quite possible that a faithful Jew like Daniel might have showed Cyrus that prophecy, and perhaps that’s part of how Cyrus realizes who the LORD is. But however God does it, what we have here is some amazing showboating by the true God, the God of heaven.

Well, it’s always fun for Christians to hear about how powerful and unexpectedly cool God is, that’s always worth remembering, but is there any more to this? Is there any particular point to it? Yes, there is. Let’s dig just a little deeper.

Let me summarise Cyrus’s decree, and see if it sounds familiar. God has given me all authority on earth; so go and build his house; and God will be with the builders.

Doesn’t that sound familiar? Maybe you remember Jesus, at the end of Matthew’s gospel, raised from the dead, gathering his disciples together and saying: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; so go and make disciples of all nations; and I am with you always. Same basic structure, right? Authority to me: off you go: God be with you. There are some big differences, and we’ll come back to those, but the echoes are so strong that it’s generally agreed that Jesus deliberately echoed this decree from Cyrus. Or if you like, because God isn’t bound by time and these things aren’t hard for him, God set up Cyrus’s decree to sound like Jesus.

And we can go a bit further. Cyrus’s decree is stunning, it’s the glory of God out of the darkness of exile, it’s the least expected person praising God when everything looked lost. And isn’t that all the more so with Jesus? When he goes “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, he’s meant to be dead! He had been dead, in fact, cold and still in a grave.

His decree is a bigger surprise than Cyrus's decree. His decree needs the Resurrection, the start of a whole New Creation. Out of darkness light.

Now, all this is very good stuff and I hope it gets your blood pumping a bit, but again, what's the exact point? Where does this hit us? Here's the point. When God turns Cyrus the pagan emperor to declare his glory to the world; when God raises Jesus his son from the dead and gives him all authority, what do they actually do with that? Where does all the showboating land? *They build the church.* Cyrus goes, "he has charged me to build him a house". Jesus goes, "go, make disciples of all nations. I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

It's not too much to say: Jesus was raised from the dead in order to build the church. Because in fact that's the whole point of why the Son became incarnate in the first place, why he suffered, why he died. Jesus the bridegroom came to win his bride. Jesus the builder came to build the house. When he's raised from the dead, of course he builds the church; that's the whole point.

And so let me say to all of us: glory in the church, honour the church. What is your great honour, as a Christian? To be a part of the church of Christ, a brick in his house, a part of his body. What is the greatest honour of this congregation, Christ Church Derby? To be a part of the church of Christ.

2. Christ Gives His Church Gifts

First, Christ builds his church. Secondly, Christ gives his church gifts. Verse 4:

And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

And, verse 6, that's exactly what happens. As the exiles obey Cyrus and get ready to go, they get given treasures from all their neighbours. They carry the gold and silver of the empire to Jerusalem to build the house of God. And in particular, v7, they're given the vessels of the house of the LORD, all the holy things used in the old temple that were taken away in the exile, Cyrus brings them out and gives them back. Again, how extraordinary. You can imagine being one of those exiles a week earlier, thinking, wouldn't it be amazing to get the temple stuff back, but you'd need the biggest army in the world to do that, and then Cyrus just is like, here you go chaps, God told me to give you this stuff. You're like, oh. Turns out it was simpler than I thought. I just needed God to do it.

But all of this is symbolic, and the symbolism isn't very complicated. Christ gives his church gifts. Take all that silver and gold their neighbours give them. Well, that is what Christ does; he brings the glory of the nations and puts it in his church. A wonderful truth: all the good things that non-Christians do in the end get turned by God to the good of his church. That's the point of them. So it's no accident that Jesus rose again in a world where the Roman empire had built really good infrastructure and kept peace so you could travel the roads safely. God set that up for his church, so the gospel could get around. It's no accident that Jesus rose in a world where the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle and all those guys, had spent centuries working hard at logic and careful philosophy. The early Christians happily took all that treasure and used it to

explain and understand the gospel better. And in a similar way all the treasures of the world today are for the church. I don't know exactly why God has given us the ridiculous power of the internet in the last thirty years, but I do know that it's for the church. I don't know exactly why God has made China such a powerful nation recently, I don't know his exact plans, but I do know that it's for the church. That's just the way it works in God's world. He works all things together for the good of those who love him. Which, by the way, if you're not a Christian, let me say to you – all your treasure, all that is valuable in your life and your work, that is for the church. You might not think so; you might not like that; but that's just the way things are. So let me invite you – come join the church, work for the good of God's church deliberately, and enjoy its blessings. Don't be one of the mugs who works for the good of the church without realizing and misses out on the fruit.

And those temple vessels, all those silver and gold bowls. I wish I understood more about the numbers and details we get in verses 9 to 11, I'm sure the Holy Spirit didn't inspire those verses by accident. But we can say this. The world's treasures come into the house; and in the house, God has given everything holy that we need to serve him. The censers that they used to offer incense, the bowls that would carry the sacrificial blood, all the different tools they needed for the service of God, God gave them those. And in a similar and much greater way he has given us in the church everything we need. That's the wonderful promise in 2 Peter chapter 1: "his divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness." The risen Lord Jesus has poured out his Holy Spirit on us. Through the Holy Spirit he has given gifts. Do we need teachers? He provides them. Do we need administrators? He gives that too. Do we need hospitality, generosity? He gives them all to us. Do we need strength to fight sin, holy hearts to love good? He changes us by his Spirit. Do we need forgiveness, cleansing, renewal? He pours out his blood. Christ gives his church gifts; all the gifts we need.

And so the point here is simply confidence. Look at the world. Is it full of power? Well, be encouraged. All that power is just going to go to serve the church in the end. Look at the tasks we have in the church. Do they look daunting? Well, be encouraged. Christ has given us all we need for life and godliness. Let's work with cheerful hearts.

3. Christ Dwells in His Church

Christ builds his church; Christ gives his church gifts; finally, briefly, but wonderfully, Christ dwells in his church. I just want to point us to one little detail here. Verse 2, who is the LORD? He's the God of heaven. That's an awesome title. He is the creator, the ruler. All things in his hand. God of heaven, on the highest throne. But look at the end of verse three. Who is the LORD? The God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Isn't that striking. The God of heaven is the God who is in Jerusalem. The God of all has picked this one little people, this one little city, and gone, that's my house. That's where I live.

And as we come to a close, that's what I want to press home to us. Not something to do as we go away this morning, but something to wonder at, something to set a fire in your heart. When we say that Christ dwells in his church, dwells in his temple, we're saying something extraordinary. Think who Christ is. The eternal Son. The wisdom of God, through whom all things were made, the Word who upholds the universe every moment by his power, the eternal Son loved by the Father, very God of very God, light from light. He is the king of kings, the conqueror of death, face too bright to look at, his kingdom endures forever. That is who we're talking about. And where does he live? In his church. And yes that church is much bigger than

one little person, much bigger than one little congregation. But still, who's it made up of? You. And me. And others like us. Ordinary saints, sinners cleansed by blood, with our little dreams and fears and faults and joys. It doesn't seem big enough, does it? I think if we see even a little of what we're like, and glimpse even a little of what Christ is like, and go, he dwells in us – it doesn't make sense, does it? Why would he do that? How can the God of heaven dwell in Jerusalem? And yet, mystery of mysteries, joy of joys: he does. He has set his love on us and come to live with us, and that is all our joy and hope. Praise the Lord.

The Desire of Our Hearts (Ezra 2)

This is one of those passages where it's helpful to be armed with a good doctrine of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17: all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Ezra 2 is *useful*. And Romans 15:4, whatever was written in former days was written for *our* instruction. Ezra 2, which might feel like the most Old-Testament chapter imaginable, Ezra 2 was written for the New Testament church. The Holy Spirit inspired it for *our* good.

And, God willing, this chapter will indeed do us some good. A set of names can tell a story, can't it. You read over the names on a war memorial, and they're just names and perhaps an age and a birthplace, but those names tell a story. It's not hard to read behind the names to the loss, the lives cut short, the families left behind. Or, totally different, with the World Cup coming up – the team list comes out a few hours before the match starts, and if you care about these things and you know your football onions, you pore over those names and you can come up with a pretty good idea of what the strategy of that team is going to be, the shape on the pitch.

Well, this chapter is like that. We're being given a snapshot of God's returning people, on their way back from exile. Chapter 1, last week, we saw God's great and surprising work of sending them back, not through any hard work of theirs, seemingly out of nowhere, just as in Christ our salvation came about simply through the surprising grace of God. But chapter 2 focuses on all those who answer the call, who give up their lives in Babylon, uproot everything, leave it all behind, travel a long way to the foreign land their grandparents lived in and settle down. These first returnees are of course a picture of us, the New Covenant church. We're also described as strangers and exiles, living in Babylon but called to long for Jerusalem. And as we look at these faithful men from long ago, we see a glimpse of what we should be like in the church of Christ, and what we can be like by the Spirit of Christ.

70 verses to get through today, quite a lot. We're going to split it neatly right down the middle. First 35 verses, we're going to see a people focussed on inheritance. And second 35 verses, we're going to see a people committed to worship. A people focussed on inheritance, a people committed to worship. And we'll end very briefly by considering the grace of God to them and to us.

1. A People Focussed on Inheritance (2:1-35)

At first glance, the list in verses 3-35 might make your eyes glaze over a little. Sons of X, this number; sons of Y, that number. Most of the names you've never heard of and can't pronounce anyway.

But don't rush on too quickly. Although at first glance they all look the same, there's a little bit of variation. Most of them say "sons of X" – so, v3, the sons of Parosh, v4, the sons of Shephethiah. And those guys, Parosh and Shephethiah and a bunch of others in this list, those are people. Parosh was something like the great-great-great-great-great-grandfather of these people, all 2000 or so of them. So they're listed by ancestry. But as well as "the sons of", you also get "the men of" – v22, "the men of Netophah", v23 "the men of Anathoth". And Netophah and Anathoth aren't people, those are places. So these 56 men of Netophah in v22, those are

56 guys whose grandparents used to live in Netophah before they went into exile, and now they're coming back to their ancestral lands. And, just in case you thought this was getting too easy, sometimes it says "the sons of" but it's actually a place not a person, like v21 the sons of Bethlehem. And that's just driving home the point that the geography and the genealogies are related. In Israel, families went together with land; the land I live on is the land my family has always owned. So when I come back from exile, I'm listed by my family or by my family land, same difference.

Well, you might say, thank you, that's very informative and to be honest a bit nerdy, but what's the point? We'll get there. But to help us get there, just ask the question: is this the easiest way to list these people? Say something similar was happening today. Say that a whole load of Americans decided to return here to their ancestral home, about 40,000 of them coming back to England, and you were in charge of the record-keeping. Don't worry, it's just a thought experiment. In this slightly terrifying scenario, how would you list them? Would you go, OK, these 1000 of them are descended from Shakespeare, and those 200 are descended from, I don't know, William Gladstone, and these 56 originally came from Derby? No, that would be nuts, that would take so much work. You would probably go: we've got this many coming from New York, this many coming from Boston, this many coming from Chicago, and so on. That's the obvious information, the easy information.

And so in a similar way in Ezra 2 you'd expect to find where in Persia these exiles are coming from. This many from Susa. This many from Babylon itself. This many from Ecbatana. And so on. But instead they put in all this work to find out, not where the exiles have just come from, but *who their ancestors were and where they lived*.

And this is not just a weird little accounting habit. Have a look at v59-60:

The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, 652.

These are the guys who want to be part of Israel, they know who their ancestors were, they know where they come from, but they can't prove it. They don't have the family trees sorted out. So they get listed separately.

So you can see, can't you, that they're taking this really seriously. Geography and genealogy. Land and blood. For the exiles, these things really matter.

Now when I say, land and blood, some of might be going, *eeek*. Sounds kind of fascist! Where is *this* going?

And the answer is: inheritance. Inheritance. This is not a fascist thing. Those guys who couldn't sort their genealogies out in v59, they're still allowed in. They're still included in the list, they get counted in the final figure. In fact, we'll find in Ezra 6 that anyone can join up if they want to, anyone can join the community and worship the true God. This isn't about excluding people. This is about treasuring God's promises. Because the return to the land is a return to *inheritance*. When God first gave the land to Israel, they divided it up into tribes and clans and families, and each family got a bit of land that was *theirs*, that got passed down through the generation. And these exiles, by making this list in this way, focussing on their

ancestors, focussing on their home towns, they're going: that's what we're here for. We care about having a share in God's people, not for the short term but for countless generations. We're not here as tourists. We're not here as colonists. We're here because we trust the promises of God and we want the gifts of God.

Now this might seem a fairly simple point to spend so much time on, but even if it's simple, it's very important. Those exiles were focussed on inheritance. That's what they were there for. And, brothers and sisters, the same should be true of us. As the author of Hebrews puts it, Christians are people who inherit salvation (Heb 1:14). As the apostle Peter put it, we have been born again to a living *hope*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an *inheritance* that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Peter 1:3-4). Those Old Covenant people inherited because of their physical bloodlines, and they inherited a physical bit of land. Those were shadows of the real thing, and any faithful and wise saints in those times knew that and they held onto the shadows because they looked forward to the reality.

(By the way, they really were shadows. Isn't the New Covenant so much better? Those guys who couldn't prove their descent – they're still allowed in, but they're listed separately because they might not get any land. But in the New Covenant, you come in, and you're all the way in. The worst sinner who came to Christ an hour ago has as much claim on heaven as the saint who's walked with him for 90 years.)

But if they had shadows, we've been given the reality. They inherited by physical descent; we inherit as children of God. They inherited a plot of land in this creation; we inherit a place in the New Creation, the New Jerusalem. They inherited a place in the people of God, near God's temple; but we look forward to living in God's temple, to walking by his light, to seeing the Lord Jesus Christ face to face.

So look at these exiles, as they leave their homes in Babylon and go to a land they've never seen. Think, as they make the long march back, hundreds of miles. Think about the hard work of keeping careful track of their genealogies and their land claims over generations of exile. What did they want? An inheritance. Brothers and sisters, how much more for us. How much more for us. Jesus says we should be willing to sell all we have to follow him; to leave father and mother, brother and sister, land and family. Take up your cross and follow me. Because there is an inheritance coming, glorious, imperishable. Brothers and sisters, lift your eyes. Look beyond this life, look beyond this world. That's what it means to be a Christian. Focussed on the inheritance.

2. A People Committed to Worship (2:36-70)

In v36, the list changes a bit. The people are still listed by their ancestry, but they're now grouped. First of all, priests, the ones who did the sacrifices and served God in the temple. Then, v40, the Levites, the ones related to the priests who helped them in their work. V41, the singers, who led the sung worship in the temple, v42, the gate-keepers who looked after the temple and guarded it, v43 the temple servants, clue's in the name there, and v55, Solomon's servants, who it seems were basically a bunch more temple servants added by King Solomon. All these lines, all these people, they revolve around the temple. Sacrificing, singing, serving.

And it's significant, I think, that these genealogies go back a long way. Again, just for the sake of argument, imagine you're dealing with these Americans coming back to the UK. Say that for each of them you've got a family tree stretching back, I don't know, 800 years. That's a lot of ancestors. But you're not going to put all that whole line of ancestors in your report; you're going to pick one. Which one do you pick? Well, I reckon you either pick the oldest one you've got, the far mists of time; or, probably, you pick the one just before they went to America. You're descended from this guy who went to America 400 years ago, and now here you are coming back. That would make sense, right? And so here in Ezra you might expect the same thing. Connect the guys coming back to the guys who got exiled. Pick up where you left off.

But they don't do that. Instead, wherever they can, they go back to the point when the temple was founded by David and Solomon. The priests, for example. Verse 36, we get four families of priests, Jedaiah, Immer, Pashhur, and Harim. Who were these guys? Well, three out of the four of them were priests at the time of David. David in 1 Chronicles 24 appointed 24 different families of priests to serve in the temple, and here we have three of those 24 families left. (Pashhur is the odd one out, if you're wondering.) Or, again, the singers descended from Asaph – Asaph was the guy that king David put in charge of the temple music. Or the temple servants – David was the guy who put them in place. And Solomon's servants, again, clue's in the name, put in place by David's son Solomon.

And so this whole list looks back right to the founding of the first temple. They've come to rebuild the temple, to reestablish worship. And they could have traced their lines back to the exile: let's pick up worship where we left off. But instead they go: we're going to go right back to the start, back to David. We don't want to get just any old worship going again. We don't want to pick up where we left off, because where we left off was wicked and got us exiled. We're going to go back to pure worship, the pattern God originally put in place through David his prophet. We're going to take this seriously. Committed to worship.

And in a very simple way, that should be us as well, shouldn't it? God's people, focussed on inheritance, need to be committed to the worship of God. Worship in this life is at the centre of all we do; it's the powerhouse that the rest of the Christian life flows from. We're going to be seeing over the next couple of weeks that the first thing the exiles do when they get back to the land, rather than build their own houses, is to build an altar so that they can start sacrificing again. One of the most basic commitments a Christian should have is to the worship of God. The Reformation, by the way, was all about this. We often think of the Reformation as the recovery of the gospel. But go and read the early Reformers, people like John Calvin – they were just as emphatic that the Reformation was about getting back to pure worship. Our worship has been corrupted, we need to get back to pure worship.

One of the most basic ways we can be committed to worship is by doing what these guys did over hundreds of miles, and what will normally take us about 20 minutes – actually just showing up. As Hebrews says, “don't give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” They came hundreds of miles to worship; let's commit to the gathered worship of God each week.

That same commitment rings through the rest of the passage. Verses 61-63, we get some more guys who can't demonstrate their genealogies. These guys claim to come from priestly lines, but they can't prove it. And they're kept out of the priesthood until a priest comes

ministering with Urim and Thummim.. The Urim and Thummim, if you're wondering, were a form of basically holy dice, we don't know exactly how they worked, but the priest would ask God a question and God would answer using the Urim and Thummim. I guess a bit like a Ouija board, except holy and good instead of, you know, evil. So at some point they can ask God, should we let these guys in, and in fact we find later in Ezra that at least one of them does get made a priest, but the point here is that until then, they're taking no chances. The priests have to be pure.

Now, again, we're in a better covenant, because we have a priest! We only need one, he doesn't die, and we can have the utmost confidence in his priestly work. Praise the Lord: it is good to know who your priest is. But we can also say, we're in a better covenant where we don't choose our leaders based on what family they come from. We're told to choose on character and gifts. But the same principle applies: guard your leadership carefully. If they cared so much to check that the families were right, we should care equally much that the character and gifts are right. So let's take that really seriously. If a man is not godly in the way Paul outlines in 1 Timothy, or if he doesn't have the gifts that he needs, he shouldn't be a minister.

And then again, v68, you have these freewill offerings to the house of the Lord. Having just moved hundreds of miles to a poor nowhere part of the empire, they go on to give generously to the temple work. And in a similar way, God commands in the New Testament that the work of the church should be supported by God's people. In fact, like the exiles, we should learn to see that as a privilege. In giving to the worship of God, and also in giving to the poor as God commands, we're putting temporary treasure to eternal use. We're spending money that won't last on riches that will.

It adds up to a picture, doesn't it? Committed to worship. Committed to the temple, not just building it physically but worshipping in it properly, with pure priests, with Levites and singers and guards and servants just like David set up. It wouldn't have the glory of Solomon's temple, wouldn't have the gold, wouldn't have the same number of worshippers or the same amount of sacrifices or offerings, but they were determined that it should be pure and whole-hearted.

Once again, these exiles are given to us as a picture, an example. They were faithful and committed, and all they had was the shadow. We have the reality! We should surely be more committed to the true worship of God than they were. In actually coming to worship, in trying to make sure our worship is according to Scripture, in guarding our leadership, in giving generously, these guys are the shadows; we've been given the reality. We've looked at that very briefly, but we'll have time to explore it more over the next couple of weeks, as we look at them rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation.

But I want to close just by reflecting a little on God's grace to them and us. We've seen a people committed to inheritance, committed to worship. But what we're also seeing in this chapter is a God who is committed to his people.

When the people were exiled, it seems about 18000 went to Babylon. They went in chains, with nothing: no land, no servants, no wealth. And seventy years later, they come back, and they've multiplied. 40000, not many to rebuild a country, but far more than went. They come back with oxen and donkeys and slaves, with singers, with money to give to the temple. The

Lord has been kind to them in the middle of their exile. He has brought them back against all odds out of their exile. He promises them an inheritance, and he dwells with them as they worship. It's all very small, new beginnings, baby steps. But how much kindness there is there, how much grace.

And more than that: isn't it striking that when the Holy Spirit inspired the Holy Scriptures, he decided to include all these names. In the world they lived in, they would have seemed so insignificant. The Persians probably barely noticed, 40,000 people, it's a lot more than 1800, but it's still a drop in a bucket. They certainly seemed very small in their own eyes. And yet God has honoured them forever by putting them in his word.

And so it is for us. That's the promise. What is our hope? Jesus tells us – don't rejoice that the demons submit to you, don't rejoice in all the great things God might do through you in the world; no, rejoice that your names are written in heaven. That our names are in the Lamb's book of life. That we will be in the temple forever: known and honoured by the God who gives life.

The Altar Comes First (Ezra 3:1-7)

Fear. Did you catch that in v3: for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands. That fear is going to bubble away through the whole rest of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Here are God's people, we saw in chapter 1 they are starting to come back from exile, last week we saw how even though they are small and weak they are faithful and they are a model for us today. But here in chapter 3 for the first time we feel their fear. As we keep reading, we'll see they sometimes respond well to that fear, sometimes not so well. Today, right at the start, they do brilliantly.

And my guess is that, even though this story is two and a half thousand years old, that feeling of fear probably seems pretty up-to-date. God's people, small in number, surrounded by those who don't sympathise with them – some friendly, perhaps, some neutral, some definitely hostile. Perhaps that feels familiar. You go into school and you've got that one teacher who just loves to talk about how stupid Christians are. Or you're at the office, and your gay coworker is getting married, and you can see a decision barrelling down the road towards you and it's not going to be pretty. Or you read a news article about the conversion therapy bill that was held up last year but might well still go through. And the fear makes your chest tighten.

In Ezra 3, when they look around at the surrounding peoples, when fear is on them, what do they do? Verse 3: *They set the altar in its place.* They set the altar in its place.

What I want to do today is fairly simple. All about altars. First, from Ezra 3, I just want to note a few details that really drum in the importance of the altar. Second, and this will be most of our time, I want to zoom out from this one passage to the whole Bible and talk a bit about the general significance of the altar. And then thirdly and finally I want to bring that down to us, today, in Derby in 2022, how we can put the altar first.

1. The Importance of the Altar

So, firstly, let's just whiz through our passage. I want us to see just how big a deal the altar is. So, v1, the seventh month came, the children of Israel are in their towns. They've arrived back from Babylon, and gone back to their ancestral homes. And you've got to imagine, there is a ton of work to do. Sorting out land claims, building houses, getting fields in order. They could be busy for years. But they leave all of that, fields, half-built houses, they put it all down and "the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem." So what follows is pretty big.

Then, v2, we get Jeshua son of Jozadak, he's the high priest, descended from Aaron, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, he's the governor, descended from King David. Now, these two are a really significant pair, they come up a lot in Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai and Zechariah, and both in different ways reflect the Lord Jesus. Zerubbabel reflects his kingly work, Jeshua reflects his priestly work. And here's the thing, the little detail it would be easy to miss: Ezra 3 verse 2 is the only time that Jeshua is mentioned first. Every other time, it's Zerubbabel and Jeshua. You can see that even as soon as verse 8, which we'll get to next week. Zerubbabel and Jeshua. But here, just once, it's Jeshua and Zerubbabel. Here, just once, priesthood is even more important than kingship. You might expect that when they build the

temple, temples are for priests aren't they, but no. It's specifically the altar, that's the priestly thing where Jeshua comes first.

Verse 3, they actually build the altar. And verses 4 and 5, we won't go into much detail there, but once the altar is built everything else can start to follow. The temple isn't there yet, there's all sorts of bits to their worship that they can't do fully, but the basic rhythms, the basic structure of their worship, that's started. Once the altar is in place, everything else can follow.

And maybe most striking of all, verse 6 and 7, we find it's not just that they build the altar first. More than that, they build the altar before they've even ordered the building materials for everything else. Imagine that, someone's building, I don't know, an office block, they buy the land, and the first thing they do is install a water fountain. Just there, in the open, surrounded by dirt. And *then* they go and apply for planning permission and hire contractors and buy cement. If you saw them do that, you would go, (a) they're crazy, and (b), I wonder what's so important about that water fountain. And in the same way, here, they come to the ruins of the temple, everything to be done, we'll see next week they lay the foundation, you'd think that would come first, but no, even before they get the materials for anything else, altar. The altar comes first.

So I hope it's clear. Short passage, just seven verses, but packed full of details to make you think, sounds like altars are super important.

2. The Meaning of Altars

So, secondly, let's zoom out a little bit and think about altars. Let me say at this point: we are going to cover a lot of ground in a short time, and if for some of you some of these details just pass you by, that's OK. Hang in there, grab what you can, and we'll see if we can stick the landing. What is an altar? At a very basic level, an altar is a holy block: a block of earth or stone or wood or metal, holy, set apart to God. Some altars in the Bible are big, big enough for people to climb up on and sacrifice whole cows; some are small, and you stand next to it and offer up incense. Some altars are just there as reminders, like statues, and you don't use them for anything; there's an altar in the temple called the altar of incense, and you offer up incense to God on it, sweet-smelling perfume basically; but most altars are altars for sacrifice, and you kill animals on them.

You might well ask, why bother? If you're going to sacrifice, why not just do it on the ground? Why go to all the trouble of making a raised platform to do it on? I mean, say you're going to sacrifice a cow, that's a tricky business, cows are really big! Hard enough as it is, do you really want the extra effort of getting the cow way up above the ground first? But apparently they do, they really do. So we should ask, why?

Part of the answer is that you need a holy place to do the sacrifice. Remember, Genesis 3, because of the fall God has put a curse on the ground. The ordinary ground, the ground we stand on, is cursed, the opposite of holy. So you need something else, and that's the altar, a holy place where you can offer holy sacrifice.

But there's another reason for altars, and that is that altars are model mountains. Altars are model mountains. I'll get to the significance of that in a moment, but just think for a moment about that first tabernacle altar, after Israel comes out of Egypt and meets God at Mount Sinai

in the book of Exodus. The people of Israel camp around the mountain, and God comes down in cloud and fire on the top of the mountain. Thick cloud, blazing fire. And the people don't go up on the mountain, in fact they can't even touch it; they send their representative Moses up the mountain to talk to God for them. On the mountain God gives Moses blueprints for a tabernacle, a tent of meeting. And one of the very first things he describes in this tabernacle is an altar. So you're an Israelite, camped next to this terrifying mountain with the burning top, you don't go up but your representative does. And then you go into the tabernacle and you see a mini mountain with fire on the top, and your representative the priest goes up to sacrifice for you. It's a model, do you see? The altar is a little portable Sinai, and the fire on the altar is the fire of God's own presence on top of the mountain.

So the altar is a model Mount Sinai. But actually we're just touching here on a much bigger theme than just Sinai. In the Bible, mountains are a really big deal. In fact, in lots of cultures with all sorts of different religions, mountains are a big deal, and the tops of mountains are often holy places. And the Bible says, that's not an accident. Remember Genesis 1, there's a vertical thing going on. Earth at the bottom, with the chaotic sea. Then the sky, which is the first heaven. And then the space where the sun moon and stars are, what we'd call space, that's the second heaven. And then the realm outside of this universe, where God is, the third heaven. There's this vertical line, and man is from the earth but he's given the breath of God and called to know God. And so if there's this vertical line, then mountains are pretty symbolic, aren't they? You go to the high places to meet the Most High.

Now obviously this is symbolism. You're not physically any closer to God on a mountain than you are in your basement. God is everywhere. But the fact that it's symbolism doesn't mean it's not important. Symbols are hugely important, that's how God teaches us the real meaning of things. And so all through the Bible you get this repeated theme of meeting God on mountains. Noah's ark after the flood comes down on the mountains of Ararat, and Noah gets out and builds an altar, a model mountain. Abraham is called to sacrifice his son Isaac, and he goes to a mountain and climbs the mountain and then builds an altar, a model mountain, puts the wood on it, and then God provides a substitute and the son lives. The prophet Elijah challenges the false god Baal, and so they go up a mountain, Mount Carmel, and they build two altars, two model mountains, Baal's altar and God's altar, and the true God sends fire down from heaven.

You're getting the picture. One more. The garden of Eden is on a mountain. I don't know if you know that. Genesis doesn't say, Eden is on a mountain, but the prophet Ezekiel does in Ezekiel 28, and actually if you go back to Genesis it's kind of obvious. Genesis says four rivers flow out of Eden, and the way you have a bunch of rivers coming out of a place is if you're a mountain, high ground. So this theme of mountains goes all the way back to the start. The first man, the first woman, start out on a mountain, a holy mountain, in touch with God himself. And there are trees on the mountain, and the man and the woman sin, and because of the sin comes judgement. A flaming sword casts them out, and they have to leave the mountain. And so they can't eat, they can't eat of the Tree of Life.

And all the altars that follow and all the mountains that follow are echoes of that first mountain. Think about the altar in the temple. A holy model mountain; on top there's wood; and there's fire, the fire of God's judgement. Just like Eden, a mountain, trees of wood, fire of judgement. And so the point of all those sacrifices on the altar is that they're a replay of the

fall, replay of the judgement of God, but the judgement lands on someone else. When Adam and Eve sinned, the judgement fell on them, on us. But on the altar, you go up with an animal, and the judgement falls on the animal and the fire burns the animal and you go free. And just like Adam and Eve should have taken of the Tree of Life to eat, but now they can't, you take the meat of the animal and eat in the presence of God and live.

Phew! OK. Now I know that's a lot. But even if some of that was a bit too much detail all at once, I hope you're getting a feel for why these exiles in Ezra 3 might really *really* care about having an altar. An altar is where you meet with God. An altar is the model mountain where God's judgement falls, but it doesn't fall on you. An altar is where you eat with God and live.

3. Our Altar

And so, thirdly and finally, what does this mean for us?

Here is a wonderful little verse, Hebrews 13:10:

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.

All those altars in the Old Testament were pictures, shadows. All the sacrifices on them were shadows, not the reality. And we have the reality. Our Lord Jesus, the great priest, has offered himself up. He went up on the cross, on the wood of the altar, and judgement from God fell on him as a substitute. And from there he gives himself for us to eat, and we feed on him by faith. When we take the Lord's Supper, we are reflecting that great mystery and enjoying a little taste of that future feast, that the Lord Jesus gives himself to us and shares his life with us in his death.

And what that means for every Christian is that the cross is your altar. The cross is where we meet with God. The cross is where God's judgement falls, but it doesn't fall on you. The cross is where you eat with God and live.

What does Ezra 3 add to all this? What does this passage in particular mean for us? It means the cross comes first, before anything else. And it means that when we are afraid, we go to the cross. As we close let me briefly expand on each of those.

The cross comes first. That little group of gathered exiles had a great deal to do, a huge job. But they knew the altar came first. And the same is true today. God has given us great things to do: a church to build, sin to fight, godliness to grow in, gifts to give to others, a world to shape, a devil to defeat. But before we can do any of that, first the cross. If you would like to do anything of value in this life or have anything of value in the next life, you must come to the cross. Let the fire of God's judgement fall on him and not on you. Eat and live. The cross comes first.

And when you are afraid, go to the cross. That is the thing that has most struck me about this chapter. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them. I don't think that's always been my instinct – I feel afraid, flee to the cross. But it should be. There's such wisdom here.

At the cross, what help is there? Well, first of all, I see that the ultimate judgement has already fallen. When I am afraid of other people, I fear their judgement, don't I: the opinions

they might hold, the words they might say, the things they might do. Those judgements and punishments might feel pretty severe. But I go to the cross and see: there is really only one judgement I need to worry about in the end, the judgement of God. And that has already fallen, and I have escaped.

We can go further: because of that, I have access to God. I can eat with him and live. I can pray to him and be heard. On the cross, God gave his son, his only Son, whom he loves; and so I know he loves me and hears me and is with me. The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

And then as I look at my Lord, at his great suffering for me, and as he gives himself to me and shares his life with me, I am strengthened. If he went to that great cross, I can take up my little cross. If he suffered greatly for me, I can suffer a little for him by his Spirit. And as God raised him from the dead, he will raise me too. Praise the Lord.

The Rebuilding of Your Soul (Ezra 3:8-13)

Christians are weird. I wonder if you feel that. In all sorts of ways, Christians are weird. You go to school and you don't use some of the words your friends use and you don't talk about some of the things they talk about or watch some of the things they watch. You go to work and hear about what your colleagues did with their weekend and you think about your weekend, going to church on Sunday. A friend comes out as gay and everyone congratulates them and seems really happy for them except you.

I remember when I was at university I went through a period of real doubt about Christianity. And I remember very vividly that one of the things I felt was just how weird it was. I woke up one morning and started praying and stopped and went, what am I doing, what weirdness is this? Who *does* that, wakes up and starts saying words in their head? I felt completely disconnected from myself.

Although it might not look like it, this passage in front of us has real help to give. When we feel weird, this passage wants to hold up a mirror and show us the reality. To be a Christian is in fact the most natural thing, the way to be truly and fully human; but in this world, while the rebuilding is going on, we will of course feel and seem weird to ourselves and others.

Before we dive into the details, a brief comment on how we read a bit of the Bible like this. Most of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about rebuilding the temple and more broadly rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the people of God. And as we've seen several times already, the New Testament draws a pretty straight line, Old Testament temple – New Testament church; Old Testament Jerusalem, New Testament church. So we've been reading this book as giving us pictures of God's church and our place in God's church.

But it's worth saying, that's not the only thing that the New Testament says about the temple. As well as the whole people of God being a temple, it's also true that each of us individually are temples of God. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. So when we read these books and see the temple, we can map that to lessons about the church, but we can also map it to lessons about the individual Christian, to you and to me. And if we had all the time in the world, we'd do all of that every time: we'd read a passage like this, and go, (A) what does this teach us about the church, (B) what does this teach us about the individual. But we don't have all the time in the world, and sometimes it's better to focus on just one thing and do that well. So today, as we look at the rebuilding of the temple, instead of thinking about the building of the church, I want to think about the building of the Christian, how the Lord Jesus Christ takes you and rebuilds you and restores you.

Here's where I want to go. There really is just one big thing that I want us to see in this passage: grace restores nature. The second temple is a copy of the first temple. And then we'll spend the rest of our time on one big pay-off from that truth, which is the joy and sorrow of the Christian life.

1. The Second Temple is a Copy of the First Temple

To bring us all up to speed, this is about 500 years before Jesus, and God's people have recently returned from exile. Some 70 years before this, they were conquered, slaughtered, Jerusalem their capital was destroyed, and the glorious temple of God in Jerusalem was torn down. All that was the result of God's judgement on their sin. And now, by God's grace and in line with God's promise, they're back: back in the land, and starting the rebuilding project. And in chapter 3 the rebuilding restarts.

And what we see over and over in this passage is that this second temple is like the old temple. They don't go, shame that the old temple got ripped down but at least it's an opportunity to try something new. In this country, after places got bombed out in the war, architects were like, that's obviously very sad, but we've got some great opportunities here to really put our mark on things, to experiment a bit, to reshape things. These gathered exiles are *not* doing that. What they want to do is to build that old temple back again. So let's look at some details.

Verse 8. In the second year, in the second month. Is it an accident that they start building then? No, it's deliberate. The second month is when Solomon started building the first temple. So when they build the second temple, they go, we're going to line that up. Start building at the same time of year.

End of verse 8, they put the Levites in charge of the rebuilding. Which Levites? All those twenty years old and upwards. Is that a trivial detail? No. 20 years old and upwards, that's how old they had to be to get involved with the first temple, 1 Chronicles 23. Again, even the ages of the workmen, we're lining that up with the first temple, doing the same thing.

Verse 10, when they lay the foundation of the temple, who do they bring forward? The Levites, the sons of Asaph. Asaph was the guy who led the music at the start of that first temple, and now his sons, his descendants, are going to lead the music for the second temple. And there at the end of verse 10, they're going to do it according to the directions of David king of Israel. David was the king who planned and paid for and organised the first temple; his son Solomon was the one who actually built it. And so for this temple, they're going, we're going back to David's blueprints. Even down to the arrangements for the singing. Lining it up.

And then verse 11. What do they sing? For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever towards Israel. That might strike you as familiar, it's a line that's repeated in several psalms. Where does it come from? It comes from 1 Chronicles 16, from the song David wrote for the opening of the first temple. In all the ways they can, these guys are lining the second temple up with that first temple. Same month of the year, same age of the workmen, same family of singers, same words that they sing. And the words that they sing explain why. Because the God they worship doesn't change. His goodness, his love, lasts forever. So you don't mess around with worshipping that God. You don't excitedly try something new. You worship the same God in the same way.

Now, like I said, every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit. So what does this have to teach us? It teaches us that grace restores nature. The new thing is a glorious rebuilding of the old thing. You can take that old temple, built by Solomon, as a picture of what man was

like originally, as God first created us in the garden of Eden, made for glory, given a commission to rule and multiply, walking with God himself. The destruction of that first temple is like the fall, where we lost our glory through our rebellion. But if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. When you trust in the Lord Jesus, you receive the Holy Spirit and are made new, a new temple of God. And what does Ezra 3 show us? That the blueprints for your new creation are the same as the old creation. God didn't start off one way, see that go wrong, and decide to aim for something totally different.

What this means is that being a Christian is the only way to be properly, fully human. It's so easy for us, as a minority in our culture, to think, what all those non-Christians are doing and thinking, that's natural, that's kind of the normal thing, and we're doing something really quite weird. But we need to learn to see the truth, which is totally the other way round. Grace restores nature. The work of Christ is to build you to your proper glory. So to live without God, to turn from God, is weird and unnatural; to worship the true God and trust him for everything, to receive from him grace and joy and life, that is to be properly human. The way our culture treats money and sex and drink and words and family, that's not natural, it's twisted; and to obey Christ with your money, with your body, with alcohol, with your speech, in your parenting: that is to step into real humanity. It is to act in a properly natural way. To selfishly live for yourself is to lose your humanity. To relate to one another in love, counting each other more significant than yourself, is to step into true humanity. Grace restores nature. The new temple is a fulfilment of the old one, the one that got wrecked.

If I could go back to that little university room where I woke up and prayed and stopped and felt like it was so weird, I think this is what I would want to say to myself. Of course it feels weird to do this in a world where people don't do this. But don't be deceived. To turn in on yourself, not to pray, not to see anything above your own head, that is a denial of reality. But to know the true God and live for him and speak to him is simply a recognition of the way things really are. A man who knows and obeys his maker is the man who is stepping into the true dignity for which he was made.

2. The Joy and Sorrow of the Christian Life

So we have the great point of this passage, that the new temple is a restoration of the old temple. Grace restores nature. And there are all sorts of things we could learn here. We could think about the way that the Christian life is not just about following a series of random commands from God, as if he was some tinpot little despot shooting out his latest crazy demands. No, the grace of the Christian life is the restoration of nature, as the good and unchanging God gives back to us the goods he first gave. We could think about what that means for the way we think about ethics, figuring out what's right and wrong, how it encourages us to read the Bible in a joined-up way, and read reality in light of the Bible and the Bible in light of reality, what the theologians like to call "natural law". But I don't want to focus on any of that here. What I want to focus on is what we get at the end of the passage. If grace restores nature, then being a Christian in this life will be a mixture of joy and grief, a shout of triumph and loud weeping all mixed together.

Have a look at the end of verse 11. "And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many

of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid." And so you get this great mixed shout, joy and sorrow all blended together so you can't tell them apart. Why the joy? That's straightforward enough, isn't it. Temple getting rebuilt, that's what they came for. But why the sorrow? Well, we get told by the prophet Haggai, who worked around this time. In Haggai chapter 2 he tells us that the reason they wept is because the new temple didn't measure up to the old one. They did all the right things; they kept the old patterns. But they didn't have the same glory. Solomon's temple had been made with the most precious wood and metal, but they can't afford that much. Solomon's temple had been covered with gold; they've only got a bit. Solomon's temple was filled with the glory of the Lord and housed the ark of the covenant, but they've lost the ark and there's no cloud of glory here. They're being faithful and careful, but the temple they're building is a pretty drab copy of what they'd lost.

And Haggai actually goes, one day this temple will have a greater glory. Because this is the temple where the Lord Jesus walked. Solomon's first temple had a glory cloud, but this drab second temple had the Lord himself.

And I want to say, this helps us grapple with the joy and sorrow of the Christian life. Those who sang were right to sing, and those who wept were right to weep. I'm sure if you've been a Christian any length of time, you will have found a bit of this. There is real joy in the Christian life – the joy of peace with God, sins forgiven. Fellowship with the saints around you. The joy of working for the Lord and knowing your work is not in vain. The joy of the beauty of Christ. Perhaps you've had that experience, maybe through summer camp or holiday club or taking the Lord's Supper, that here is a little taste of heaven itself and God's goodness is too big to take in.

But I'm sure you'll also have felt that weeping. The frustration of the presence of sin with you, the old man as Paul calls it, the flesh, dragging you down. The sorrow of working away in a world that hates Christ. The deep grief of seeing people walk away from the faith.

And we get both of those in the New Testament, don't we. Jesus tells us, come to me, you will find rest for your souls. He also tells us, blessed are those who mourn. Paul says, Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice. And he also says, through many trials we must inherit the kingdom of God. We see Jesus shouting praise to the Father, and we see him weeping over Jerusalem. That's our Lord. And that will be our path too.

And Ezra 3 helps us get that, I think. What joy to be rebuilt, to be founded on Christ the sure foundation, to be made into a temple of God himself. What joy to taste and see that the Lord is good. And yet, in this life, so frustrating. Do we get anywhere near the glory Adam had before the fall? No. Like the second temple, we are always in this life so far short of the first temple, so far short of the original goodness. In our sin and weakness, in the hold death still has on us, we feel the gap between where we are and where we want to be.

But that sorrow and that joy are not equals. One day the sorrow will end, and the joy will bloom forever. Like Haggai said to these weepers, chin up. One day the glory of this temple will be greater than the glory of the first temple. One day the Lord himself will come to you. And, brothers and sisters, how much more so for us. We were made glorious in the first

creation, made to rule the world. We have fallen so far. But if we are being built on Christ, then one day we will have a far greater glory. In the New Creation, we will fulfil the first creation and go way beyond it. Because the Lord himself will be with us, and he will be our light; we shall see him clearly, face to face; and we shall be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Samaritans are a Total Nightmare (Ezra 4)

Growing up, my family had various games for long car journeys. Classic ones for little kids like I Spy; great ones for older kids, like Botticelli, (if you've never played Botticelli and you'd like a car journey game, come ask me afterwards). But one of the ones that has really stuck in my mind, for whatever reason, is Word Association Football. Perhaps some of you have played it. Someone starts with a word, and then the next person has to say a word that makes them think of, and so on. So I might say "green" and you say "grass", for a particularly boring example. It was quite a boring game on the whole. Like I say, we moved on to Botticelli.

But sometimes word association can be quite revealing. Suppose we were for some reason playing word association football, and I said, Samaritan, I reckon you would almost certainly say, "Good". That's what we associate with Samaritan, isn't it? Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is so famous that it's become the main thing we think of when we hear Samaritan. Samaritans, good.

But Jesus' parable was shocking when he told it, because everyone knew that Samaritans, on the whole, weren't good news. And that's what we see in this passage, in Ezra 4. If you want a heading for our passage today, here it is: Samaritans are a total nightmare. We're going to see, verses 1-3, steer clear of Samaritans; and from v4 to the end, Samaritans want to hurt you. Samaritans are a total nightmare.

That might need a bit of explanation. Let's back up a little. We started this series on Ezra before Christmas, and we're just picking it up again. Ezra is one of the less travelled bits of the Bible for most of us. It's set around 500 years before Jesus, after the exile. God's people Israel were torn up out of the land, their capital Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple pulled down, that's the exile. And some 70 years later, some of God's people are told by the Persian emperor to go back and start rebuilding. And so they do, and we saw before Christmas how those first believers coming back from exile and making a small start in sad circumstances, they are a great encouragement and model for us.

And today we come to Ezra 4. A quick note before we dive in. We're really only going to cover the first six verses of chapter 4 this morning. And if the dark thought crosses your mind, at this rate we shall never finish the book of Ezra, we shall never get out, take heart. Next week, Lord willing, we're going to go from chapter 4 verse 6 all the way to the end of chapter 6. But the start of chapter 4 is one of those bits where it's worth slowing down.

1. Steer Clear of Samaritans

Like I say, the first message is, steer clear of Samaritans. Let's dive in with verse 1.

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here."

Now, who are these people? The word isn't used in this chapter, but these are Samaritans. They're the ancestors, the physical and spiritual ancestors, of the Samaritans Jesus dealt with. And to understand this chapter, we need to understand a bit about them. There at the end of v2, it mentions Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. Let's fill that out a bit. Back before the exile of Judah, over a hundred years before that, was another exile. The rest of God's people, the northern kingdom of Israel, had come under his judgement in 722 BC, when the king of Assyria besieged their capital, overthrew them, and deported all their leading people. Well, just like the southern exile, there was a return for the northern people. King Esarhaddon of Assyria sent some of them back to resettle northern Israel. And they settled down and started worshipping the Lord, which sounds great. But they weren't willing to give up their other gods, so they just did both. Bit of worship for the true God, bit of worship for the false gods. That's the Samaritans. You can read all about that in 2 Kings 17.

So when these guys say in Ezra 4, let us build with you, we worship your God as you do, it's half true. They do worship the true God. But they don't worship the true God truly. They worship God, and they also worship a bunch of other gods, and they're fine with that. And Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the heads of households give exactly the right answer in v3: "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." In other words, the great commission was given to us, the true worshippers; we are separate from you; we will not partner with you.

Now, at this point we might be tempted to think, OK, but this is the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, they have to separate from everybody! Separate separate separate. And in the New Testament, things change. The dividing wall is broken down. In Christ there's neither Jew nor Gentile. So we can respect their faithfulness in their situation, but this doesn't really apply to us.

But to that I want to say, not so fast. Yes, there is a glorious inclusion in the New Covenant; we'll come back to that. Yes, there's no race or people group that must stay outside the people of God now, praise the Lord. And yet this does still have quite a sharp application for us. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul talks about church discipline. There is a situation in the Corinthian church where a man is practising serious unrepentant sexual immorality. And Paul tells the church, put him out. Separate.

And he clarifies: I'm not saying you have to be separate from the sinful world; you can't leave the world. You'll have to work and talk and eat with those who worship other things, other Gods, and that's fine, that's part of how the Lord will gather his church. But, he says, do not associate with anyone *who bears the name of brother* if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler— don't even eat with such a one. In other words, if they're getting drunk and sleeping round or scamming people and they don't claim to be a Christian, well, fine, the world is full of people like that and you've just got to get on with life. But if they are doing those things and they're saying, hey, I'm a Christian too, let me fellowship with you, let me build God's house with you, that's red alert. Absolutely not. You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. With such a person do not even eat.

In other words, in the New Testament world, we still have people like these Samaritans. They are the people who claim to follow Christ but refuse to leave behind their sins, refuse to

put off the old man, refuse to take up their cross. And Paul tells us to do exactly what Zerubbabel did: separate.

Now, my guess is that this kind of exclusion and separation instinctively feels weird and even wrong to many of us. And that is a sign that we need to take this all the more seriously. It is precisely where the Bible feels alien to us that we need to pay most attention. In fact, a refusal to practice church discipline, a refusal to say, you cannot live in sin and be in Christ, has been one of the greatest weaknesses of the church in this country for the last several generations. There is an opposite error, by the way; it's possible to separate all too quickly; we want to be joyfully and generously welcoming to all who are truly in Christ. But we need to follow the example of Zerubbabel and Jeshua and our fathers in the faith. "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to God."

2. Samaritans will hurt you

But if we're tempted to think that this is harsh, then the rest of the passage helps us. You see, the thing about Samaritans is that they will hurt you.

We might be tempted to think it was harsh, well, there were probably people at the time who thought so too. There might well have been some people in Israel who thought, "Why not bring the Samaritans in? They've got resources; and a bit of partnership in temple-building could be a great opportunity to witness to them. Why be so exclusive?" But what happens next shows that Zerubbabel and the rest are absolutely right. Because the Samaritans don't take their rebuke and consider it and repent or anything like that; they show their true colours, and they oppose the rebuilding. They discourage them, v4, they make them afraid, they bribe counsellors to frustrate them, v5. And, v6, they step up their operations and take the whole matter to the emperor. We'll be looking at that in more detail next week, but let's just point out for now that their letter is a combination of dragging up old sins that have already been dealt with, plus a heavy helping of insinuations and ascribing evil motives without evidence, plus just a bunch of straight-out lies. They paint themselves as just concerned for the emperor's honour, but it's very obvious that there's more to it than that. They *hate* God's people. And we see at the end of the chapter, don't we, verse 23. These opponents get the reply they wanted from the emperor, stop the work, and v23 when they get the letter, what do they do? "They went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease." They hurry. They can't wait. And in later chapters of Ezra, and in the book of Nehemiah that follows Ezra which we're studying in our midweek groups, these same half-worshippers of God show their true colours again and again. They are, consistently, the most deep-dyed enemies of God's people.

And we could trace that theme through Scripture, couldn't we. The worst enemies of God's people are very rarely the out-and-out-pagans. Sometimes they are; in the book of Esther the big baddie is Haman, he's as pagan as they come. But usually the big threat is the Samaritans, the people who claim the name of the true God, who claim to worship the true God, but who actually despise him. So think of the Exodus. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, looks like the big enemy. He is a big enemy! And yet he holds back God's people for just a few weeks or months while God pummels him with plagues, and then he lets the people go. But the false worshippers within the camp of the Israelites, the ones who want to worship God and still keep a foot in idolatry – they manage to slow Israel down for 40 years. Think of King David. David kills

Goliath, the giant Philistine, without a problem; but King Saul, the false worshipper within the camp of Israel, keeps him in hiding on the run for years. Our Lord Jesus comes to those who were his own, but his own do not receive him. Who attacks him, who is out for his blood? It's not the pagans, the Romans, they don't care. It's the religious establishment, who claim God's name and yet hate his Son. Who is consistently behind the persecution of the church in the book of Acts? It's that same religious establishment, the unbelieving Jews. Who is most frequently warned about in the New Testament letters? It's the false teachers, the false believers within the church. In Ezra 4 terms, it's the Samaritans. Samaritans will hurt you.

And the reasons for that don't take much uncovering. Samaritans can seduce us in ways that nobody else can. You see a non-Christian doing something vile and you may be tempted or appalled or whatever, but you know they're not a Christian and it's not that likely to deceive you. But you see a Christian doing something vile, you see the dean of a Cathedral smiling under a rainbow flag at a pride march, and you're far more likely to think, ah, this is an issue Christians disagree on. Here's a brother and he's fine with it and who am I to judge. This is exactly why Paul says to separate in 1 Corinthians 5. A little yeast works through the whole lump, he says. The world will struggle to persuade you to join them. But someone who comes under the name Christian will have a much easier job.

And it's not just that Samaritans are seductive, deceptive. It's also that Samaritans are prickly. If you go, I'm a Christian, I worship the true God, what's a non-Christian going to think? A pagan is going to go, well, whoop-de-doo for you, I guess, bit dumb to think that there is one "true God", but whatever floats your boat. But the Samaritan, the one who claims to worship the true God, will hear you and bristle. How dare you say that you're worshipping the true God in your exclusive, narrow way? How dare you exclude me and criticise me like that? And so the Pharisees hated Jesus and the false teachers hated Paul and the open evangelicals like Steve Chalke hate us today. So it goes, brothers and sisters, so it goes. Samaritans will hurt you.

And this helps us see that the principle of separation, that firm "you are not with us", that doesn't come from a harsh and loveless heart. It comes from the Lord, who is love. The faithful people of God say no to the Samaritans because they love the Lord, they love his holiness, they love his house, and they love his people. And they know that if you refuse to say no to Samaritans, you in fact say no to all those things. If you refuse to say no to Samaritans, you are refusing to honour the Lord's holiness. If you refuse to say no to Samaritans, you are refusing to build the Lord a pure house. If you refuse to say no to Samaritans, you are refusing to protect Christ's flock, you're bringing wolves into the sheepfold. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.

So: Samaritans are a total nightmare. God's people must separate from them. But as we step back from this and look at the whole picture, I want to give us one further exhortation, an urgent warning, and then I want to close by considering Christ.

Here's the word of exhortation. We've seen in this passage the importance of separating from Samaritans. But even more than that, please hear this: do not *be* a Samaritan. How do you be a Samaritan? Very simple. Hold on to Christ with one hand; hold on to your sin with the other. Brothers and sisters, do not do it. Don't be a Samaritan. Put the old man to death, and

put on the new man. Take up your cross daily and follow Christ. Whatever the sins you are most tempted to, take up that shield of faith and helmet of salvation and the word of God and pray in the Spirit and *fight*. Because to be a Samaritan is death. If you insist on holding on to your sin, you will find yourself in the end hating those who don't, hating those whose holiness shows you up. You will, whether in obvious ways or subtle ways, end up working against the holiness of the church and the people of God. And in the end, either in this life or the next, there will be a separation, and the Lord himself will say to you, away from me, I never knew you. Do not be a Samaritan.

But let me close, not on that note, as important as it is, but on the Lord Jesus Christ. This passage hasn't been much fun, has it? It's not exactly the passage I would have chosen for my son's baptism, this just happened to be the Sunday that worked. I hope, like me, you're hungry to see a little of the Lord at the end of this. Let's close with Christ.

500 years after Ezra 4, the Lord Jesus went through Samaria. And he met a Samaritan woman by the well, and they got talking. And he was pretty blunt with her. We worship what we know, he said, you worship what you do not know, for salvation is from the Jews. He didn't whitewash it. It's bad to be a Samaritan. But the Lord said to this woman, this Samaritan of Samaritans, a wicked and used-up individual in a wicked and withered people, he said to her, ask me, and I'll give you living water. Ask me, and I'll give you the Spirit within, and you'll never thirst again, and you'll worship the Father in Spirit and truth. And the woman leaves her water jar and goes to the town and says, come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ? And Jesus, waiting for her to return, the disciples offer him food to eat and he waves it away, not hungry, I have food to eat you know nothing about. Longing for the salvation of Samaritans. And the people come to him, and he speaks with them, and he gives them the water of life.

Brothers and sisters, it is a terrible thing to be a Samaritan. Do not be one. We must separate from them. And yet here is the glorious truth: the Lord Jesus loves Samaritans and came to save them. He gives his gospel to them as well. And he still does. That's why in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says that part of that aim of that church discipline is so that the sinner should be brought to repentance and restored to the church.

We have a commission from the king to build a house to our God. We must be pure and holy, because it is a holy house. But what a joy: we have a king who gives purity to the impure, who makes unclean people holy. Come to him, come daily to him for grace and washing and love, and in the power of his Spirit build his house.

Civil Government (Ezra 4-6)

How should Christians think about civil government? (If the phrase “civil government” is a bit unfamiliar to you, Christians tend to distinguish between “church government”, the elders, the deacons, the way we run the church, and “civil government”, kings and mayors and the houses of parliament). How should we think about civil government? Should we fear them? Should we trust them? You’ll find there’s lots of Christians who take one of those approaches. And you can make a good argument for each approach from Scripture and from experience! It’s easy to make an argument that we should fear government. Read Revelation 13, where unbelieving government is represented as a beast that fights against God’s people. Look around the world and see governments persecuting Christians. Even in the UK, where we have it pretty easy, there are signs, there are tremors of moves to make life harder for Christians. And there are some of us who are very alert to that. Antennae always up. I remember I had a lecturer at seminary – and this is in Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the bastions of Christian belief, about half the people in Charlotte are in church on a Sunday – and this man in his sixties kept on telling us, I’m sure I’m going to go to prison for being a Christian before I die. Whether or not he is proved right in the end, that’s a fairly pessimistic view of his government he’s got there.

Or you can make quite a strong argument from Scripture and experience for being very pro-government. Romans 13: government is given by God for our good, and Christians should have a default expectation that they will obey the government and the government will do them good as a result. You can look around this country and see bishops in the House of Lords, churches are charities so we get to claim Gift Aid, there’s lots of ways in which the government is pretty helpful to us and good to us specifically as churches. And so you can make the case for being positive.

One of the reasons I want to take a big fat reading this morning is because if we take in the whole of this chunk of Ezra, we see right next to one another that *both* of those things are true. We need to have on the one hand an alertness to the possibility that government can do us harm. And on the other hand we need to be alert to the possibility that God will do us great good through government. And so we’re neither paranoid nor overly comfortable and trusting.

Just to give us a bit of background: the book of Ezra, about 500 years before Christ. The people of God are very small, very weak. They’ve recently returned from exile in Babylon to Judah and Jerusalem, which were wrecked a while back under God’s judgement. They’re surrounded by enemies, who want to do them harm.

In this long passage, two sets of letters exchanged. Both sets come from unbelievers who aren’t really pro-God’s people, and both receive a reply from the emperor. The result of the first is that the emperor shuts down the work on God’s house through force. The result of the second is that the emperor decrees that God’s house needs to be rebuilt and pays for it himself. Night and day! And yet they’re put right next to each other to teach us.

1. The First Letter Sequence (Ezra 4)

We thought last week about Samaritans: those who claim to worship the true God, but don’t worship the true God truly. And in v7 we get a bunch of these guys, Bishlam and Mithredath

and Tabeel and their associates. And they send a letter to the emperor. It is a vicious little letter! Sent by a poison pen. Let's have a look at it.

In verse 13: *Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.* – God's people are bad news for you, O emperor. That's the headline. They are against you.

Verse 14: *we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor.* We're good people. We're pro-you, O emperor! We're on your side.

Verse 15 is the core of their argument. *You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste.* You can tell they're bad people because they've done loads of bad things in the past. (We'll come back to that in a second.)

And then verse 16 is where we get the crunch: *if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.* And it's just worth saying that that final claim is *absolutely ludicrous*. The Province Beyond the River is basically most of the Middle East, and the Jews are so small that they can barely populate Jerusalem at this point. So their claim is wildly overblown.

And yet they get exactly what they want! The king reads their letter, he checks, he finds out: yes, they really have done some bad things in the past. And he replies: stop them in everything that they're doing.

Now, it's worth just having a look at these guys and thinking about their playbook. Their playbook is to go: *Christians are against government*. Now, sometimes (sometimes!) you get governments where the people in power themselves are against Christians. Communists in Cambodia a couple of decades ago, for example. But normally in Christian history, if a government cracks down hard on Christians, it's not because the *government* particularly cares. It's because they are listening to people who care, listening to activists who are putting pressure on them. The government just wants things to run smoothly, and to keep being in charge! But these people come to them and say, the Christians are against you (or the believers are against you, obviously Ezra 4 is pre-Christ), and if you let the Christians keep going, everything will come crashing down.

And one of the things they do is to point to past sins and big them up. Verse 15, this city is harmful to kings and provinces. Well, that's kind of true! If we went back historically to before the exile – why, in historical terms, did God's people get exiled? God first of all put the king of Babylon over them and *didn't* exile them. The king of Babylon conquered them, he exacted tax and tribute from them, they had to serve him and so on. But he didn't really hurt them, he didn't kill them. And God's prophets said to the people, this is from God and so you need to lump it. Serve the king of Babylon faithfully! But they don't: God's people, in rebellion against God, rebel against Babylon. The exile comes about because they keep on rebelling against Babylon. They refuse to listen to the prophets; they refuse to submit.

So verse 15 is kind of true: there have been people in Jerusalem who were rebellious and wicked people. What it misses out is: those were the people who ignored the prophets and ignored God. And all the exiles who are coming back and rebuilding Jerusalem, they're the

ones who *are* listening to the prophets! They are truly God's people, and so they're going to act in completely the opposite way to the guys before the exile.

So it's completely skewed picture, designed to make the king nervous. And it works.

We see that playbook over and over again through history. And it's work noticing this in our own country in our own day. Again, just little tremors, little signs. We've talked a bit in this church about the current conversion therapy bill, for example. That bill, if you're not aware of it, said essentially: any attempt in any way to help someone who thinks of themselves as same-sex attracted or transgender, any attempt to help them live in a way different from that "identity", comes under the heading of conversion therapy. And because some people have done things under the name of conversion therapy which are indeed very horrible, therefore *all* such things – including prayer and reading Scripture – should be banned. Parents doing that with their 13-year-old daughter might be criminalised. Now, when the government proposed that bill, it's clear that they weren't going "what we really want to do this year is nail the Christians." But there were some Samaritans involved. You can go and look this up: people like Steve Chalke, the Jayne Ozanne Foundation. There are various liberal Christians who really hate the teaching of Christ who were instrumental in getting that bill set up the way it was. Now, praise the Lord, that bill hasn't gone through at this point, although it's still facing Parliament and it's still worth our prayers. But do you see: the same playbook is being used. Attaching faithful Christians to wicked deeds done by others, and saying to the government: these guys need to be cracked down on if you're going to survive.

Any civil government that doesn't bow the knee to Christ might do what this emperor does. If you can persuade them that Christ is a threat to them, then down they'll crack.

What is the lesson for us? I think it's simply this: be aware that government can do this. It is normal in history for God's people to suffer under the hand of civil government. We've had a long period in this country, a very long period, where that hasn't been the case. But it certainly could happen again. In some small ways, as I've mentioned, we do see it happening again. In practice, that means we want to be alert to dangers, and setting ourselves up shrewdly to meet them. Take buildings, for example. A lot of churches in our denomination don't have their own building, and we often pray for them that they would get one. That's not just a convenience thing. It's also shrewd! We want to be set up so that we can better face attacks like that if they come. Another concrete example, a friend said to me recently that he thought churches should reorganise their budgets so that if Gift Aid gets cut off, you're not suddenly thrown into a financial tailspin. Do something like putting your gift aid in a separate pot, use it to pay off your mortgage faster or save up for an expensive mission project or something. Strikes me that there's wisdom there.

But if the first half helps us to be shrewd and alert, the second half helps us to avoid being paranoid. The government can hurt you; but governments aren't necessarily out to get you, and they can be a great blessing to the church.

2. The Second Letter Sequence (Ezra 5-6)

In v1-2, encourage by Haggai & Zechariah, they restart rebuilding.

And again, in verse 3, the local leaders come to them, and ask “what are you doing?” - and again they send a letter. But this one is pretty different. Rather than being full of slander, Tattenai and co send a letter that is mostly just quoting the Jews. They report accurately what the Jews say about themselves. “They say that they’re building a temple to the God of heaven, they say that they’ve even got a royal decree to do so, and we thought we should flag that up with you, o emperor, let us know if you’d like us to do anything.”

And in chapter 6 the emperor does check, and he finds it’s true: there was this decree from Cyrus that starts off the book of Ezra, sure enough, there it is, and he sends this magnificent letter back. Chapter 6:7, don’t interfere. Don’t get in their way! Verse 8, the cost is to be paid to these men in full. I want to help this: give them money. Verse 9, help them out with the sacrifices as well. Verse 10, I want them to pray for me in this temple. Verse 11, if you do anything against them, I will put my full force down on you. If anyone does anything against them, a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be impaled on it. Pretty ruthless! But pretty good for the people of God.

That is an amazing turnaround. From “Go in force and stop them doing anything” to “don’t touch them, except to give them money and help.” Probably didn’t take Darius a long time to dictate that letter. send someone off to the records to find out: 10 minutes. Find out it’s true, dictate a letter: 10 minutes. He probably didn’t think about it that much. And yet what a huge difference it made for the people of God.

There is an important lesson here. Particularly, perhaps, to those of us who are tempted to always have our antennae up to anything that could go wrong from the government. It is perfectly possible for authorities who do not recognise Christ, who are not Christians to act justly and perceptively, to see that Christians are good citizens, to treat them well.

We see that in the book of Acts. Sometimes the authorities are against the Christians, usually because they’re egged on by false believers. Paul gets thrown in trouble and whipped and so on, it’s a pretty rough ride. But sometimes the Roman authorities (who aren’t Christians) simply do justice, and protect the Christians and help. Gallio the judge throws out a frivolous lawsuit against Paul. The Roman commander protects Paul from getting assassinated. Even unbelieving civil authority can be a very great blessing to believers.

That means that we need to be confident. When we face a situation with some authority (the school board, or Parliament itself), you don’t go into it thinking “they’re all out to get me.” In general, they’re not! That’s not the way Scripture presents civil government to us.

More than that, we see here that we shouldn’t be squeamish about governments helping the church. That clearly happens here, and it’s clearly a good thing sent by God. A lot of Christians today seem to think that the fact that church and state are separate institutions, the fact that God has ordained the state and God has ordained the church and those things are not the same – that means that the state should never treat the church any different from anyone else, just another charity. But of course that’s not quite true. Governments, like everyone else in this world, are called to obey the Lord Jesus Christ, and Scripture is very clear that God gives good government as a gift to his church. So when we come across governments that want to treat us well, we should accept that gratefully rather than looking a gift horse in the mouth.

We can see that from church history. If you know anything about the first few hundred years after Christ, those first 300 years or so were a pretty grim time for Christians. Wave after

wave of persecution. Not just the sort where you don't get to build a church building; more the sort where you get dragged from your family and thrown to the lions. And then, famously, in the early 300s, the emperor Constantine converts to Christ and declares that Christianity is now legal. There is no more persecution. And the blessings from that in church history are incalculable. After Constantine (whatever you think of him as a person!), the church grew and blossomed, grew deeper in its understanding of its Lord, sorted out a whole load of problems they hadn't really been able to sort when they were dealing with persecution. We should be grateful for such things in the past.

And actually, we should long for those blessings in our own day. In our day, we'd be grateful for a government that just left us alone and didn't take away our charitable status. But it's good to dream big and pray big. We should be praying not just for a government that leaves us alone, but for a government that comes to recognise Christ once again and govern in a way that honours him and helps his church.

What makes the difference? We've got these two letters. After one, persecution slams down on God's people. After the other, God's people are helped. What makes the difference? Have a look at 5:5. *But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.* Why did Tattenai write such a just letter? Why did he not stop the Jews while he waited for the reply? The eye of God. The hand of God.

Have a look at 6:22. *And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.* Why does Darius send such a glorious, glowing letter for the sake of God's people? God turned his heart.

Civil government is in God's hands. So we're taught in 1 Timothy to pray for our government. We pray so that we may be able to do good in peace, and so that more and more people might be saved. But we don't put our trust in government. We don't put our trust in princes. We act as upright citizens, we seek to do good and we honour the emperor; but our hope is set on God who rules the hearts of men.

And so let me take us back to Ezra 5:1-2. *Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild.* God's people do not do very much in these three chapters. But the heart of what they do is this. While opposing governments are around them, while they wait to find out whether the government will help them, they listen to God's word and they obey it. If our trust is in God before it's in government, that means we listen to God before we listen to government. If God allows us to face persecution, he is good and he will keep us. We can trust him in that. If God gives us favour with government, he is good and we praise his name.

I want to finish by looking to the Lord Jesus Christ. Ezra 4:16. In Scripture, when God's enemies speak slanderous words against God's people, what we often find is that in an ironic and unexpected way those slanderous words come true. Ezra 4:16: *We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.*" As we said earlier, that is simply a lie, and a ridiculous lie at that. If the

weak people of God rebuild their little city, the great emperor will not lose a huge chunk of his empire. And in fact Jerusalem does get rebuilt and they're good citizens this time and the empire is just fine. Because this was a lie.

And yet in God's providence and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, there's a truth there. That is what the Lord Jesus is doing in his church. It starts out ridiculously small, insignificant: a few people in an upper room praying. But it has grown and grown, and kings of the earth have brought their treasures into it. And one day, when Christ returns and his full glory is revealed, the church will outshine any empire there has ever been. There will be no place for any kingdom or power that does not bow to him. All those powers will lose everything. The devil, the prince of the power of the air, will be banished for ever, and God will rule in Christ to our great joy.

The Strange Silence of God (Ezra 5:1-2)

I want to do something a little different with Ezra this morning. We've been working through the book of Ezra, seeing the story of these exiles, seeing the story of their faithfulness and their rebuilding. We got all the way up to chapter 6 last time. And this morning I want to come back and focus on these two little verses and something that God does *not* say in them. I want to look at a strange silence of God in these verses. Then broaden that out and see how that strange silence keeps on coming up through Scripture, and then we'll see what that means for us.

1. The Strange Silence of Ezra 5

Here's Ezra 5:1-2: *Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*

In these verses, the people of God do pretty well. They've faced some serious opposition – in chapter 4, if you remember, people came to them on the emperor's orders and stopped them rebuilding – but here the prophets come and spur them on and they respond well and do the work and God is with them, the prophets supporting them. In Ezra so far, the people of God have done pretty well. We'll see some sins later in the book, in chapters 9 and 10, but so far it's just been really positive, and this is another example of that. They listen to God's word, they obey God's word, and God preserves them.

But it's very striking to read these verses when you go and read what Haggai and Zechariah actually said to them.

Here's how Haggai starts.

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: ² "Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." ³ Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (Haggai 1:1-4)

This is a rebuke. God says to them through Haggai, you guys are busy with your own houses, your own projects, and you've given up on building my house. You've got your excuses, "it's not the right time", but the basic fact is that you are abandoning me and turning away to your own comfort. And it's so serious that God says he has started disciplining the people, and they've had bad harvests because of their disobedience:

You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. (Haggai 1:9)

You have been disobeying me, you have been neglecting my glory, and I have already been disciplining you. That is the message Haggai brings to the people. So when the people listen to Haggai and seek the Lord and do the work, it's not simply that they've been doing well and they continue to do well while they shift up a gear: no, it's repentance! They turn around! They were sinning and they leave their sin and seek God and serve him.

Well, Haggai preaches in the sixth month, and they start building in the seventh month. How about Zechariah? He starts preaching a little bit later, in the eighth month. They've already restarted work. You might expect, therefore, just solid encouragement from him. "Well done, you've repented, now keep going." But no: here's how Zechariah starts.

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, ² "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. ³ Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 1:1-3)

Zechariah starts, just like Haggai, with a message of repentance. You are away from me; you must return to me! They've already started again on the temple, but clearly there's still some repentance to go, and Zechariah doesn't beat around the bush. Repent, return. It's strong stuff, fierce stuff.

Now in the light of that, doesn't Ezra 5 seem rather remarkable? All Ezra says is: Haggai and Zechariah prophesy, and the people rise up to build, and the prophets are there *supporting* them. There's no mention of rebuke. There's no mention of repentance. It's just really positive.

What do we do with that? Arguments from silence can be dangerous, can't they. Any time you say anything, there's a billion and one things you haven't said. If I tell you that God loves you, and you go "well, he didn't say anything about the price of tea in China, and that proves that theology doesn't say anything about Chinese home economics, so if you want to be a theologian then you have to leave those things behind" – well, that's nonsense, isn't it? I just wasn't talking about that.

But sometimes silence is significant. And particularly when you get the same kind of silence over and over again. And in fact the silence we see here is one that happens over and over again in Scripture. I want to give in some detail two more examples.

2. That Strange Silence, Over and Over

First, David. King David, probably one of the most famous Old Testament figures. Famous for many things, writing a bunch of psalms. Also famous for the time he committed adultery, and lied about it, and committed murder to cover it up. Nine months of hard-hearted rebellion against God, abusing his kingly power. The absolute pits. And the prophet Nathan comes to him and confronts him, and David finally recognizes his sin, and goes, I've sinned, and immediately, immediately, Nathan goes, the Lord has taken away the guilt of your sin. You're forgiven. Just like that. Remarkable.

But what happens next? Well, two very important things. On the one hand, Nathan goes, you're forgiven, but there are still going to be consequences. You've brought sexual sin and

murder into your house, and they're not going to leave. Those things don't go away quickly. And the rest of the book of Samuel covers the horrible fruit of that, David's baby son dies, his other son does something truly awful that I won't mention in an all-age service, and that leads to murder and eventually to civil war. The consequences of David's sin spiral on and on. I think it's probably fair to say if you put the books of Samuel and Kings together that even the division of the kingdom into North and South and the exile of the people in the end has its roots in David's sin. It's big big stuff. The consequences are painful.

And yet, if that's one thing, that there are all these consequences to David's sin, the other thing is that we stop talking about David's sin. It stops being mentioned. You can read about David's sin in the psalms, where he confesses to God; but the narratives don't talk about it any more. They don't go, "oh and this bad thing happened because of David's sin. Oh, that one too, also David's fault. See this bad thing? Remember David? Listen, kids, don't commit adultery." You might remember from our series in 1 Kings that the narratives *do* bang on and on and on about *Jeroboam's* sin. Jeroboam who never repented, who led the people in idolatry. Some wicked king will rock up and the narrator never fails to point out to us, "They did it just like Jeroboam! They followed in the steps of Jeroboam." So it really wouldn't be odd for us to keep being reminded, "this is all because of David. Remember the stupid thing David did!" But instead of that there's silence.

And actually, more than silence.

1 Kings 9:4, God says to Solomon,

David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules.

We read that and we want to go, wait what? I can actually think of two quite big statutes and rules that he didn't keep, God! What are you talking about? But there it is: David did all I commanded.

Or a couple of chapters later, when Solomon screws up and turns away, we get 1 Kings 11:4:

For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father.

And again we want to go, David's heart was wholly true to the Lord his God? Since when? Where do 9 months of adultery and murder and unrepentance fit into that?

And when you read the book of 1 Chronicles, it's even worse. 1 Chronicles goes back over David's life again and tells the story again, and it just leaves out his sin entirely. Doesn't even mention it! Leaves out the sin, leaves out the consequences. Just presents David as this glowing, righteous figure.

So you get these two things. On the one hand, real, ongoing consequences for sin. On the other hand, this strange silence. Almost as if God couldn't see David's sin any more. As if it had been covered.

Another example before I draw this together for us. Lot. Abraham's nephew Lot. If you read the book of Genesis, you come across Lot several times. And most times you meet him, you want to shake him and go, "you are such a chump! Stop it!" He's the guy who picks where he wants to live by what looks good, not by God's promise. He goes and lives near Sodom, famous for its wickedness. Then he ends up living *in* Sodom, and he gets captured and his uncle Abraham saves him, and he has this great opportunity to have his eyes opened and go "probably I shouldn't live in Sodom any more", and instead he just goes straight back to Sodom. He becomes a significant figure there. And when God sends angels to destroy the town, Lot puts them up, and when townsfolk come to attack the angels Lot offers his own daughters to them, awful awful stuff. When the angels tell him to flee, he can't even make up his mind to do that, he hesitates, the angels have to force him out. His wife dies under God's judgement, and his daughters end up doing awful wickedness that I won't go into here. And that is the end of Lot's story in the Old Testament. He loses everything he has, his wife and whole family end up under God's judgement, all he saves is his own skin. The consequences of Lot's foolishness are very very severe.

And yet when we get to the New Testament, we find a very strange passage. 2 Peter 2 verses 7 and 8.

He (God) rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard).

And that's it. That's all the New Testament says about Lot. It doesn't mention his folly and his sin. It doesn't mention the awful consequences. Peter zeroes in on pretty much the one good thing you *could* say about Lot, which is that when he saw the evil around him he didn't like it. The evil around him distressed him. And Peter picks up that one thing and holds it out to us so that we might honour it, and calls him, *righteous Lot*. Righteous Lot. How remarkable.

That is not a one-off. There's plenty more examples we could see. Did you know that in the whole New Testament, no faithful Old Testament figure is ever directly criticized for their sin? Wicked people like Cain and Esau are criticized, they're held up as negative examples, don't be like them; unfaithful Israel as a nation is criticized, held up as an example, don't be like them; but the faithful individuals never are. It would be so easy to hold up David and go "Don't commit adultery, like David did, the consequences were really bad." But that never happens. Lot isn't criticized. Moses isn't criticized. Even David, about the closest the whole New Testament comes to that is when Matthew mentions in Jesus' genealogy that Solomon was born from the wife of Uriah. You can figure that one out, and marvel that Jesus came from a family full of sin. But it's not held up as a "look at David, don't do that" thing. You read the Old Testament and it's got these messy characters and you get to the New Testament and it looks back at them as heroes. What's going on?

And the answer is simple. The answer is Christ. The cross of Christ. The answer is atonement.

In the Bible, the word for atonement comes from the word for covering. When God forgives a sin, he covers it; he covers it with the blood of Christ. He remembers our sins no more. He removes them from us as far as east is from the west. They're covered.

We often say those words, don't we. We have them in our confessions, we often hear them in our services. And yet so striking to see that the application of that covering is that God stops talking about our sins. He really does remember them no more! Sin has consequences, yes. But constant reminders, no. No. It's gone. David's heart was wholly true to the Lord his God. Righteous Lot. In Ezra, the people rose and worked and the prophets supported them.

We've seen those three examples, and there are so many more that we could see. The Lord recorded those sins in Scripture for us to learn from. You can go and read about David's sin, you can go and read about Lot's sin. But he also recorded his silence in Scripture for us to learn from. You get past Genesis and you don't hear another bad word about Lot. The book of Haggai mentions the sin, but the book of Ezra covers it over. He remembers those sins no more.

And I want in the time we have left just to reflect on this in two ways. First, for our encouragement, that this is the way the Lord treats us. And second, for our instruction, that this is the way we're called to treat each other.

3. The Way the Lord Treats Us

We often find it hard to believe, I think, that the Lord really forgives us. We sin, and maybe it's a smaller sin, a bit of laziness or a cross word. Maybe it's a bigger sin. An abortion, maybe many years ago. Perhaps years where you walked away from the Lord. And big or small, we come to the Lord and we confess that sin and repent and seek his forgiveness. If there is restitution to make, we try to make it. And yet, I wonder if you know this experience, the weight in your stomach and the ache in your heart don't quite vanish. You pray, and yet you still feel like you might be unclean. Perhaps you are still living day by day with the consequences of your sin, daily reminders of it.

But brothers, and sisters, take heart. There might still be consequences; but when God covers a sin, he really covers it. If I can put it this way, when God speaks of you to his angels, he does not refer to you by your sin. No, he's covered that. He's not thinking about it, he's not talking about it.

When Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13, he says that love does not count up wrongdoing. It keeps no record of wrongs. And God, who *is* love, keeps no record of wrongs for his loved ones. If you are his, seeking his mercy, seeking his grace, he has not written down your sins. When his books are opened, your sins won't be found in them.

More than that, it's not simply that various days or years of your life get blotted out. It's more that they get looked at through the lens of grace. Through the lens of love. If you were going to remember one episode in Lot's sorry life, probably the one he wouldn't want you to remember is that awful night when he offered his daughters to the mob and nearly missed out on God's grace by dithering. And yet that's exactly where the apostle Peter goes, not to blame him but in the middle of all that foolishness and sin to pull out the one little seed of righteousness, that Lot at least hated the evil round him, and he pulls that out and focusses your attention on it. All the rest of that muck and sin, that's covered, why on earth would we talk about that. But that little righteousness, so small and easily overlooked, God prizes that. God calls us all round to look at that and marvel.

And on judgement day, the Lord Jesus tells us it will be exactly the same. The parable of the sheep and the goats is so remarkable, isn't it, in many ways. Jesus speaks to the goats, I never knew you, and they're amazed. We thought we were great. But he saw their real deeds. But he also speaks to his sheep, and he praises them and welcomes them into glory, and they go, whoa whoa hang on, when did we do all that, when were we half as righteous as you're making out? And he draws their attention to their little righteousnesses, their little kindnesses to the poor that they had forgotten all about. But the Lord Jesus hadn't forgotten. He'd treasured those things up. If you are in Christ, seeking the Lord in humility, then he keeps no record of your wrongs, and he treasures up your righteous deeds and rejoices over them. How rich his grace is to us, don't you think? How extraordinary.

4. The Way We Should Treat Each Other

And, second, if this is how the Lord treats us, then this is how we should treat each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And the very simple point I want to make here is that forgiving someone involves covering over their sin. Just like with God, it doesn't mean no consequences. If someone has been stealing money from the church, we forgive them, but we don't make them treasurer. There are consequences to sin. But there is also covering. When we forgive one another, except on the very rare occasions when it might be necessary and helpful, that means we don't even talk about that any more. We don't have to bring it up. It's gone.

That should be true of big things and little things. We might let it slip under our radar with little things. I think it's fairly common in families and friendship groups to keep talking about someone's sin as a kind of joke or banter. Particularly if we think it's quite a small sin. Haha, do you remember that stupid thing you did, what a chump, ho ho ho. Or how you were like that for five years. And the poor unforgiven sinner laughs along unconvincingly. If that's you, brother or sister, time to cut that out. Many a truth spoken in jest, isn't there. A good rule of thumb is: was there anything to forgive in that thing that we're talking about? Was there any sin in it? If so, that is not a fit subject for a joke. Just leave it. The Lord has covered over your much bigger sins. You cover that one as well. Find something better to laugh about.

And it's true for big things as well. If you are holding a grudge, if there is someone you feel bitter towards, perhaps they well deserved it. And yet the Lord calls you to cover it. I highly recommend a little article called "How to Be Free From Bitterness" by an American evangelist called Jim Wilson, who died a couple years ago. It's only about eight pages, some of the most helpful eight pages I've ever read. It's well worth reading the whole thing, but here's a quote.

How can we tell if we are bitter? One good rule of thumb is this: Bitterness remembers details. You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you remember every single word, his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice. You know exactly what happened -- which means you are bitter.

He's right, isn't he? Unforgiveness remembers. Forgiveness forgets. If that's you, then God is calling you today to forgive. Cover that sin over. Leave it. Don't let it roll around in your mind. When you're tempted to chew over it, go to God in prayer instead. Don't keep prodding

that sore spot. Cover it. The Lord covered your sin, the Lord will judge that sin in his wisdom, you cover it. And if you go, but that's so hard, well, seek the Lord's grace. He loves to forgive, and he loves to give us grace to forgive. He loves to cover sins; he does not love to remember them. He delights in mercy. So seek him while he may be found, and rejoice in his grace, and forgive your brother.

Ezra Himself (Ezra 7)

Marvellous. This is a wonderful chapter; I've been encouraged and blessed by it, and I hope it will be a rich help to many of us.

A bit of background as we get into it: we've been looking at this little Old Testament book of Ezra, a book about the people of God coming back from exile. This is around 500 years before Jesus. God's people Israel were in exile in Babylon for their sins, and God in his great kindness brings them back. And the first half of the book, the first six chapters, deal with the people coming back and rebuilding the temple. At the end of chapter 6 they finish the temple and they celebrate with great joy. And then in chapter 7 we get a bit of a watershed moment, because, finally, Ezra himself shows up! Book's named after him, but we first actually meet him here. And the rest of this book, these last four chapters, is all taken up with what Ezra does as he comes to Jerusalem.

Now, here's where I want to go this morning. We're going to very quickly skim through the first nine verses, and then we'll slow right down and spend actually most of our time in just one verse, verse 10, and then we'll speed up again and whiz through the rest of the chapter at the end.

1. Get Excited About Ezra (7:1-9)

So, first, these first nine verses. From these verses I basically just want us to get excited about Ezra. He comes to give the people rest, to help them, to give them life.

That might not be immediately obvious, but the writer has given us a bunch of clues. First clue: **rest**. In chapter 6, the people finish the temple in the sixth year of king Darius. In chapter 7, Ezra turns up in the 7th year of king Artaxerxes. Now, you can read the commentaries and find different opinions on the actual timelines; Darius and Artaxerxes might be names for one guy, so Ezra turns up a year after the temple is built. Or they might be names for different guys, and Ezra turns up 60 years later! I want to say, it actually doesn't make very much difference. The point is the pattern. When something big gets finished on the sixth, and then you get something else on the seventh, you're meant to go, I've heard that before. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In the Old Testament, slaves only work for six years and they go free in the seventh year. The seventh year is a year of rest, of release from bondage. And that's the year when Ezra turns up. Rest.

Second clue: **help**. Ezra's name *means* "helper". And more than that, we're given this whole long genealogy, this family tree, going all the way back to Aaron (more on him in a second). And in this family tree, the idea of help keeps on coming up. Aaron's son is Eleazar, which means, God helps. And there's a name in that list which comes up twice, two Azariahs. And Azariah means, the Lord helps. So Aaron's family keeps on coming back to this idea, God helps, the Lord helps. And then finally Ezra turns up, the helper.

Third clue: **life**. Ezra turns up in the fifth month, in the first day of the fifth month, v9. Now, the fifth month is significant: that's the month that Jerusalem was destroyed in the exile. And the first day of the fifth month is also significant, it comes up only one other time in the Old Testament: that's the day Aaron the high priest, Ezra's ancestor, that's the day Aaron died. And

so the fifth month has been a month of endings in Israel, a month of death, the end of their first great high priest, the end of their city and their nation. And now in the fifth month, on the first day of the fifth month, instead of something ending, something is *starting*. Ezra arrives, a new Aaron, like Aaron reborn. His name means helper. It's the seventh year, the time of rest. And all these little clues, rest and help and life, they should be getting us bouncing. What's this Ezra like? How is he going to bring rest and help and life?

2. Why Ezra is So Great (7:10)

So, now we come to verse 10. Let me read it again for us.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

That's it. Ezra studies the law, he does what it says, and he teaches it to others.

Now, perhaps this is just me, but when you say to me, rest, help, life, a scribe is not the first thing I think of. You can imagine one of those role-playing games, can't you (and at this point I should make clear I have never played D&D or anything like that and have really no idea what I'm talking about, and if you play those more power to you, come tell me afterward what I get wrong here), and I sort of imagine that when you start out you introduce your player characters. So one guy will be like, "I am Aberforth the mighty, knight of renown. My sword was forged from a falling star and I have slain twenty dragons." And the next guy will be like, "I am Radagoth the shrewd, the famous wizard. With the power in my staff I built city of Kilian and laid waste the army of Varholt," – or whatever, I have no idea, I've never played these games. And then your third guy will come along and be like, "um, I'm a scribe. I spend a lot of time, uh, reading books, and, and I also write books, or at least, I make copies of other people's books. Hello!"

Kind of feel like the mighty warrior and the shrewd wizard could be a real help in a tough spot, the scribe maybe not so much. And yet when God wants to give rest and help and life to his people, he sends Ezra the scribe.

And the key to grasp here is that Ezra brings rest and help and life because the Word of God brings rest and help and life. That's all Ezra does, isn't it: study the word, do what it says, and teach it to others. And by bringing the word in that deep, lived, clear way, he brings rest and help and life. Because that's what God's word does.

You see, God's word is an expression of him. Just like your words reveal to people what you're like, so God's words in this book reveal what he's like. And he's so *good*. Everything good in the whole world comes from him, from his eternal joy and love and wisdom. And in these words, these supremely good words, he wants to give us his goodness, to share himself with us.

And so what's going on in those three parts of verse 10? Ezra studies the law. He opens himself to God's goodness, he plunges into it like diving into a deep pool. If God's words are good, then the first step is obviously listening to them, and that's what Ezra does. But he doesn't stop at just listening. He does what the law says. He doesn't just want to see the goodness of God and then go away to darkness, he wants that rest and joy and goodness in him, he does

what God says. And finally in the strength of knowing the law and of doing the law, he teaches it to others.

It might be helpful to think of this like food. God tells us that his words are like bread. They're good for us, and they're delicious. Well, Ezra is like God's head chef. Like any good chef, he knows the food inside out. He knows the ingredients, he knows his tools, he knows all about salt fat acid heat, he knows food. But he doesn't just know; he eats. Never trust a chef who won't eat his own cooking. But Ezra eats; he doesn't just taste the food, he swallows it. The law goes into him, he does what it says. And finally, of course, he serves it up to others. Ezra studies the law, Ezra does the law, Ezra teaches the law. And through that comes rest and help and life for God's people.

And the key point here, again, is that God's blessing comes through his word. God speaks to us because he wants to bless us. When he wants to give us rest, what does he do? He speaks. When he wants to help us, what does he do? He speaks. When he wants to raise us from the dead, what does he do? He speaks. These words, that you are holding in your hands, are the work of God himself as he wrestles to bless you.

And I just want to play that out for us today through these three parts of verse 10.

a. Study the Word

Ezra studies the law of the of the Lord. I want to encourage us to study the Bible. It's food for you, spiritual food. Open your mouth and eat. Aim for spiritual fatness.

Now I'm very conscious that that encouragement, which I mean as a blessing and which God means as a blessing, might sound in your ears like a curse, a burden. And that might be particularly true because of the way the church in this country has taught discipleship. I think many of us somehow picked up the idea that the real measure of your Christian life was your "quiet time". *If you read the Bible and prayed this morning, it's a good day. If you missed it, eh, God will forgive you, but you will feel bad for the rest of the day until you get it right tomorrow.* I'm exaggerating, obviously, but I think many Christians actually do live like that. I know I did for a long time. And if that's any of you, I'd love you to be set free from that today. God has given us many encouragements to read the Bible, to love the Bible, to be hungry for his word and meditate on it and learn it by heart, all that good stuff. But he doesn't give it to us as a chore, he gives it to us as food. There is no commandment in Scripture to read the Bible every day. So we should be, on the one hand, ambitious to know Scripture deeply, and on the other hand not create rules for ourselves that God hasn't given us. That's a Pharisee move. A daily habit of reading the Bible is a wonderful wonderful thing, a foundation for life. Don't make it the measure of your walk with God.

But having said all that, I really do want to say, let's be ambitious to know Scripture. Because it's rest, it's help, it's life. Don't you want more of that in your life? And my encouragement to you would be, what can you do to get a bit more Scripture in your life and your heart? Maybe if you don't currently have any pattern of reading the Bible, start small. Just read one little section of a gospel. Not a whole chapter, just a section. Try do it every day. Even if you miss some days, that's fine, you'll have plodded through all four gospels in about a year and a half. Wouldn't that be good for you? Looking at Jesus just a little bit every day, what

might that do for your soul? Some of us might be in a place to be more ambitious than that. Fantastic. Read a chapter a day, several chapters. Read a bit of the Bible at every meal, maybe. When you're washing up or on your way to work, put on an audio Bible and crack through the book of Ruth, or Ephesians. Have fun with it. Maybe start learning the Bible by heart. Did you realise if you learned one verse every Sunday afternoon, you could learn the whole book of Philippians in two years? God wants to do us good in his word. Let's give him every opportunity to bless us. Come talk to me about this! I would love to talk to you about what studying the Scriptures might look like for you personally. If you want help, come ask.

And if you fall off the wagon, well, remember, it's food. If you miss a meal, you don't go, ah, missed a meal, might as well miss the next three at this rate, and I can't eat again until I can make sure it's really gourmet. If you don't read the Bible one day or five days, don't beat yourself up, just start eating again.

b. Do the Word

Secondly, we'll do the next two a bit more briefly, do what it says. Ezra *did* the law. Let's do the same thing. When the Bible teaches a truth, believe it. When it gives a promise, trust it. When it tells you to do something, do it. Think of food. You don't put food in your mouth, roll it around, savour it, and then spit it out again. At least I hope you don't; that won't nourish your bones. No, you taste it, and swallow it. Doing what the Bible says is just like that, it's swallowing it.

In our sin we're so tempted to see this as a burden, aren't we? But this is all part of God doing us good. He doesn't need us to obey for his sake, for his satisfaction. He commands us for our blessing. And so when it comes to the Bible, we should be like my daughter picking blackberries. You see it, you eat it. Don't hesitate. It'll be good for you.

Let me just pause here. I'd like you to think for a moment of something God commands that you don't like. Something he tells you to do, or something he tells you to stop doing. I reckon most of us will be able to think of at least one without too much difficulty, because that's how sin works. Got one in your head? Now, brother, sister: God gave you that command because he loves you. It is rest, it is help, it is life. Swallow it. Ask the Lord, God, help me trust that this is good for me, and help me to obey you.

c. Teach the Word

And then thirdly, teach it to others. Ezra studied, Ezra did, and Ezra taught. Now obviously this will hit some of us differently than others. Not all of us are called to be teachers in the church, and if you do any kind of official teaching this verse has a particular weight for you. And all of you, please pray for us who teach, for Joel and me and Matt and Tim and our community group leaders and the people who help in kids work and so on. Pray that God would help us to study and to do and to teach so that the whole church would be blessed. We need the help of God's Spirit.

But I want to say, as well, this does also apply to all of us. In Colossians, Paul tells every Christian to let the word dwell in you richly as you speak to each other. And that means all of

us, even if you'll never stand up at the front of church, God's plan for you is that he blesses you and feeds you through his word and then you more and more start to feed and bless others. Older women teaching younger women what love looks like in practice. Parents raising their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And all of us in our conversations, in our prayers, receiving God's blessing in his word and passing that on, in small ways and big. That's God's design for his church. Don't you want to be part of that? So sink yourself into God's word, and do what it says, and ask God to make you a blessing.

So that's verse 10. Ezra studied, Ezra did, Ezra taught. Rest and help and life. Let's do the same.

3. The Great King

I've basically run out of time, but I hope you'll bear with me, I just want to squeeze in two final thoughts. Firstly, just note the massive encouragement of the end of the chapter. We're not going to go into the details of this big letter Artaxerxes sends, but he basically says, Ezra, go and serve the Lord and I'm giving you everything you need. Everything. Official approval, food, gold, money, the whole shebang. Everything you need. And in a similar way, if you're a believer, we read in 2 Peter chapter 1 that you have everything you need for life and godliness. Just like Ezra was given all he needed by the great king, we've been given all we need by the greater king, his Word to guide us and his church alongside us and his Holy Spirit within us. God is so keen to bless you. He hasn't missed anything out.

But finally, I want to finish on the Lord Jesus. We've looked mostly at Ezra and how he's a model for us. But Ezra's not just a model for us, he's a picture for us of our great helper, our best friend, the Lord Jesus. And isn't it lovely to consider how fully verse 10 describes Jesus? He set his heart to study the word. Jesus, who was God, set himself to the word of God. When the devil tempted him, every time he answered with Scripture. He lived on it, he knew it, he trusted every word. And he did it. When God spoke, he obeyed. Here I am; I've come to do your will. In the garden, as he sweated drops of blood in anguish, he prayed, "Your will be done." He did God's word. And so he is our perfect teacher, the one who brings God's word to us and writes it on our hearts and shows us the true love of the Father. And in that way he is our rest and help and life. Praise the Lord.

In Between The Two Resurrections (Ezra 8)

Ezra 8 is one of those chapters where you might look at it and go, man, this is a tough one. Some things happened I guess, but I don't really know what to make of them. Lots of names and numbers, people camp out and send messengers and weigh bowls and sacrifice animals and it all feels quite a long way from, well, anything relevant to my life.

But, no surprise, there is actually gold in here for us, as there always is in God's word. In order to get the gold out, we're going to need to do a bit of a crash course in Biblical symbolism. This is a true story, but it's also a story that represents and symbolises a bigger story, and I want to show you how. For some of you this will be very familiar, for some of you it will be pretty new, for all of you I hope it will be exciting. I love Biblical symbolism and I hope you will too.

Here's how we're going to do it. First, the crash course. I want to point out the big symbols in this story and say what they mean. We're going to see that this chapter is really a picture of the whole Christian life, from the moment you first come to Christ until the moment you meet him face to face. Then, once we've got that basic picture clear, we'll focus in on that bit right in the middle, where Ezra and the people fast and pray for a safe journey.

OK? So a fair bit to get through, hold on to your hats, let's go.

1. A Crash Course in Symbolism

What are the symbols in this passage? First, Babylon and Jerusalem. We start out with Ezra and the people in Babylon. The name Babylon means confusion, chaos, and in the Bible Babylon represents the rebellious world, humanity at war with God. And Jerusalem, the name Jerusalem means peace, and Jerusalem represents humanity reunited with God, it represents the church in this life but even more it represents the New Creation, the world Jesus will bring when he comes back, the New Jerusalem. So if you're on a journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, that's a journey from being at war with God to being at home with God.

Second, the number 12. In the Bible, the number 12 is the number of God's people. So in the Old Testament, you have the 12 tribes of Israel, in the New Testament, you have the 12 apostles. And basically whenever you get the number 12, you're meant to think of God's people. Now this chapter is *stuffed* with 12s. We start out with this list of families that join Ezra, and if any of you were counting, there are 12 families. And more than that, if you add up the numbers, the number of people who join Ezra to start with is 1440, which is 12 times 12 times 10. Lots of 12-ness. Later, Ezra puts 12 men in charge of the temple vessels. They leave for Jerusalem on the 12th day. When they arrive, they sacrifice 12 bulls. You get the picture. 12, 12, 12. It's just drumming home, this chapter is about the whole people of God. Even though there's just a few thousand people involved, these people are a picture for us of God's *whole* people, including you and me. God's whole people, on their way from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Babylon, Jerusalem, the number 12 – what else? Three days. Twice in this passage you get people stopping for three days. Once at the start in v15, Ezra gathers the people and then they just camp out for three days before doing anything else. And once at the end of the journey in

v32, they reach Jerusalem and what do they do? Well, they just stay there for 3 days. You might have thought they'd do all the big important sacrifices and stuff straight away, but no, 3 day wait. What does 3 days mean? 3 days is resurrection. Jesus dies on the cross, and on the third day he is raised to life. And in the Old Testament you often have three day periods which are death and resurrection. Jonah gets swallowed by a fish, three days, out he comes. Abraham gets the call to sacrifice Isaac, on the third day God provides a substitute and Isaac lives. Saul, king of Israel, dies; on the third day David gets the news and knows that he is now king. Three days is resurrection. What does that mean here? Well, we have a journey with a resurrection at the start, three days, and a resurrection at the end, three days. That's the Christian life. The Christian life starts with a spiritual resurrection, a new birth, you are spiritually raised with Christ and given new life. And the Christian life is heading towards a physical resurrection, when Jesus returns and calls you out of the grave and you join him forever, raised into a perfect and glorified body. In between those two resurrections is where you are right now, if you're a believer, part of God's people on the road from Babylon to Jerusalem.

2. A Map of the Christian Life

OK. Phew. That's today's crash course done. Well done for holding on to your hats. Now that we've got all that in place, we can slow down. Because the key question for us is, what does this chapter actually teach us? In the Bible, symbols are never there just to make a pretty pattern, they're not just a jigsaw puzzle for us to figure out. Symbolism is always there to teach. So, here we are, Ezra 8 symbolises the whole Christian life for the whole people of God. Cool, fine. What are we meant to learn from it?

Now, we could keep up the breakneck speed and try and go through the whole chapter and see all the lessons this symbolism opens up. And there are a lot. I'd love to spend time on these Levites, Sherebiah and Hashabiah, and the whole deal with them and the silver and gold vessels, there's some cool stuff going on there about the leaders of God's people. There's a whole sermon in that section – point 1, we need leaders, point 2, we need leaders given by God, point 3, those leaders will give an account to God for the souls in their care. That's good and important stuff and we're just not going to go there. Do come ask me afterwards if you want to know more about that. I want to focus us instead on those three verses in the middle, verses 21 to 23, where Ezra and the people fast and pray.

I want to work our way to the heart of these verses bit by bit. We'll start with Ezra's decision not to ask for an escort, why does he do that? Then we'll think a little about fasting and prayer, what does the fasting add? Then finally we'll tie it all in to this big symbolic picture, the whole Christian life for the whole people of God.

a. A Focus on Glory

So, first, why doesn't Ezra ask for help? They humble themselves before God and fast pray for deliverance from bandits and ambushes on the way. And then Ezra tells us, you know, I could have just asked for a massive armed guard from the emperor, but I decided not to. Why does he do that? There's nothing in God's law that forbids them accepting a guard. Later in the next book of the Bible, in Nehemiah, we get a similar situation with Nehemiah making the

same journey under the same emperor, and Nehemiah happily takes an armed guard, and that's all good. So Ezra really doesn't have to do this. He could get a guard from the king, and you could imagine a lot of the people with him might be happier. No need to miss any meals for fasting, no need to worry about you and your wife and kids getting attacked by bandits on the way. Armed guard sounds good.

And the answer seems to be, Ezra doesn't accept the guard because he wants to show off God's glory. Here's verse 22:

For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him."

Ezra had told Artaxerxes, God is with his people, and he thinks, if I turn round now and ask Artaxerxes for an armed escort, it wouldn't really look like I believe that. Big words about God being my sword and shield, but when it comes to the crunch it would be nice to have some physical swords and shields, just to be sure.

Some of you will know the story of George Muller, a man who ran an orphanage in Bristol in the 1800s. Famously, Muller didn't allow any kind of regular giving to his orphanage, or any kind of fund to be set up, he didn't fundraise, he didn't do anything that would provide some financial predictability. He decided that as an act of faith he and the orphanage would rely on the unprompted, non-regular giving of just whoever God provided. And remarkably, God did provide. There were times when Muller wasn't sure how he was going to pay for the next day's food for the boys, and then someone gave what they needed. One time at breakfast they had no food, and Muller got all the boys sat down around the empty tables and said grace for the food they didn't have and there was a knock at the door and the baker was there and said, thought you could do with some bread, and there was another knock and the milkman said, my cart just broke down in the street so I've got a load of milk I can't shift, do you want it. Remarkable stuff. There's a similar vibe with what Ezra's doing here, isn't there? There's nothing wrong with regular giving, there's nothing wrong with fundraising, the apostle Paul did both of those. There's nothing wrong with getting an armed escort from the emperor, Nehemiah did that. But there are times when a godly man senses, actually, it would honour God more to let go of those visible physical things and let him provide more directly. And God honours that.

My guess is that this sort of thing is well out of the comfort zone for lots of us, isn't it? And I'm not going to give you examples of times and places where I think you should pull a George Muller or do an Ezra. I'll just note two brief things. First, Ezra's motivation is not that he might look cool or because he'd like a spiritual buzz or anything like that; it's for the glory of God, that he might be honoured. If you want to be wise about figuring out, is this a Nehemiah situation or an Ezra situation, that basic motivation is the place to start. Seek the Lord's glory in more obvious matters and it will become clearer how to seek his glory in things like this.

Second, in Ezra's case and Nehemiah's, and also in George Muller's actually, what is remarkable about these men is how much they *pray*. Whether we accept the armed escort or go without it, safety is found in seeking the Lord. And so that brings me on to Ezra's fasting and prayer.

b. A Denial of Self

Have a look at verse 21:

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

This isn't the right time or the right bit of Scripture to go into a long discussion of fasting. But it's worth talking about briefly, I hope there'll be a chance at some point to do something more thorough. Fasting is going without food for a while, sometimes for just part of one day, sometimes for days at a time. And it comes up quite often in the Bible. Moses fasted, David fasted, Elijah fasted, Jesus fasted, the disciples in Acts fasted. Jesus expects his followers to fast sometimes, he teaches us about it in the Sermon on the Mount.

My observation is that in our little bit of the church, in conservative evangelical churches, fasting is kind of out of fashion. We don't talk about it much, and I think we probably don't do it much. Go to a charismatic or a high Anglican or an Eastern Orthodox church and they love fasting, but we're not so good at it. And I think we need to be honest and go, we're missing out. Jesus did it, he expects us to do it, we should probably do it! If you want a brief read to get you started, I've found this little book helpful, *God's Chosen Fast* by Arthur Wallis. You can borrow it off me or buy your own copy.

Like I say, I hope there'll be an opportunity in the future to do some further teaching on it. But for today, I'll just say this. The point of fasting is right there in v21. It's to humble yourself. When you fast, you're saying to yourself and to God in a very simply physical way, I will not grab hold of pleasure and strength for myself, I want to get those things from God. It's the opposite of what Adam and Eve do in the garden. It's a denying of self, a putting down your natural desires and appetites so that your spiritual desire for God and approach to God might have less competition. In the Bible, fasting is always about humbling yourself, and it always goes together with prayer.

3. And So We Wait

And that leads me on to the most important thing about these three verses. Why are they here? Here is this chapter which symbolically gives us a picture of the whole Christian life for the whole people of God, from spiritual resurrection to physical resurrection, from Babylon to Jerusalem. Right at the centre of this chapter is this little episode of fasting and seeking God's protection. What does it show us about our life and our journey as Christians?

The answer, I think, is not something very surprising. It's said over and over again in Scripture, because we need to hear it over and over again. The Christian journey from Babylon to Jerusalem is one where you humble yourself and depend completely on God. Humility and dependence. Humility and faith.

The great Christian teacher Augustine said, if you ask me, what are the three most important things for the Christian life, I would say, humility, humility and humility. And he's right. Jesus starts the Sermon on the Mount, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will*

inherit the earth. Poor in spirit, mourning, meek. Humility, humility, humility. Humble yourselves under his mighty hand, and he will lift you up.

We are so quick to want to *do* things, aren't we. Give me things to do, tell me something that will make me act differently this Monday than I did last Monday. And the Christian life is full of things to do and things not to do, and God's commands are very good and sweet and life to the soul. If you haven't been fasting, I hope that's something you'll start doing. And yet all those doings, those commands, are in a sense not the heartbeat of the Christian life. Isn't it striking, in Ezra 8, this chapter about the great journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, that it tells you almost nothing at all about the journey itself? Verse 31, we left. God kept us safe on the way. Verse 32, we arrived. 1000 miles, just like that. We don't get the detail on the journey, because the real detail was before the journey. The thing it wants you to see is not Ezra and his men doing something impressive, but Ezra and the people with him *not* doing something. Not asking for the emperor's help, not even eating. Just humbling themselves, sitting before God, asking his protection, waiting on his help. Because that is the Christian life. Plenty to do, plenty to obey. But underneath all that, we're waiting. Our salvation didn't come from us in the first place. Our final salvation, our final resurrection, that won't come from us either. We're just waiting, and God will do it, and we'll rejoice.

One of my favourite verses in the Old Testament comes in Isaiah 25, you might want to turn there. Isaiah 25 is a great chapter that looks ahead to God's final salvation. It's wonderful stuff, verse 6, God will spread out a great feast, verse 7, he will get rid of death forever, verse 8, he'll wipe away every tear from every eye. And then verse 9, when God does all this saving, this is what we will say.

“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

That's it. That's the Christian life. We wait, and God comes through. If you remember one thing from Ezra 8, let it be that scene: Ezra and the people round him, on the banks of the river, not eating, not asking the emperor for help, humbling themselves before God. That's you, that's your life. Wait on the Lord, and he will save you.

Intermarriage (Ezra 9)

Here we are, at the end of the book of Ezra. We've seen eight chapters of God's people doing well. They return from exile, making the long journey in faith. They want God's inheritance, they build the altar and lay the foundations and resist opponents and build the temple. Ezra comes along and again a bunch more of God's people journey in faith. Over and over again, God's people do well, they are models for us, and I hope if you've been coming along you'd agree that there has been lots of strengthening encouragement and help for us. And then Ezra ends with this great grief and mourning.

We are going to look at these two chapters over three weeks. This week, chapter 9, we're going to drill into this sin of intermarriage that Ezra faces. It has a great deal to teach each of us. Next week, chapter 10, we're going to look at how to respond to sin, how Ezra leads the people in actually dealing with it. And then we'll have one final sermon, God willing, on what this shows us about the Old and New Covenants. Ezra is a book where lots goes right, this is really the best of the Old Covenant, but it ends with sin and grief because the Old Covenant is not as good as the New Covenant. So we'll end by thinking about how the New Covenant that Jesus has made with us is better. This week and next week we'll probably feel quite down in the dumps; I hope that final one will get our hearts singing.

So, let's get into Ezra 9. We're first of all going to see the sin that Ezra faces, the sin of intermarriage. And then we'll just spend a good while thinking about what that teaches us, first about our literal marriages, and then spiritually about our sin more generally.

1. The Sin of Intermarriage

So let's dive in and see what's actually happening.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." (Ezra 9:1-2)

The sin that drives these last two chapters of Ezra is the sin of intermarriage. The people should have separated themselves, they are a holy people; but instead they've married, they've gone to the peoples round them and married foreign women who worship foreign gods. And you can see from Ezra's reaction that this is a pretty serious sin, can't you. Verse 3, he tears his clothes and rips up his cloak and pulls out hair and beard and sits in the dust. And for hours he doesn't eat, or drink, or even speak. Just appalled.

And he's right to be appalled. In our day and age, we think this is weird. Why make such a fuss over who marries who? But Ezra knew how powerful marriage is and what a deep pull it has on you. That list of nations in verse 1 is very deliberate; it's meant to draw our attention back to older bits of the Bible. The Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites; not all of those nations even exist any more in Ezra's day. They're quoting from Deuteronomy, where God lists the nations

they're going to drive out from Canaan and includes those nations in the list. And then God says this,

You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

For they would turn your sons away from me. The point of this marriage ban is not a racial purity thing or anything like that, in fact people from other races are welcome to marry into Israel, that's the whole story of the book of Ruth. No, the point is the religious divide. If you, worshipping the true God, go and marry this woman or man who worships Molech, they will drag you away and your heart will not stay true to God.

And the list in verse 1 also goes back, not just to Deuteronomy 7 but to 1 Kings 11. King Solomon. The wisest man who ever lived before Jesus, famed throughout the world for his deep wisdom, the man who built the temple of God and brought peace to Israel. Solomon does so well; he is so glorious. And at the end of his life his heart turns away. Why? Intermarriage. Solomon marries foreign wives. And the polygamy is a problem, 700 wives is too many, the right number is either 0 wives or 1 wife, but actually the polygamy isn't as big a problem as the worship. It gets drummed home for us:

And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods. (1 Kings 11:3-4)

And so when we get to this story in Ezra we look back to God's direct command: don't marry those who don't worship me. And we look back to the single wisest, strongest, most blessed man Israel had ever had, and we see why. Don't intermarry with those who worship death, because you will die.

So, that's the situation. What do we do with this today? Like I said, I want to highlight two ways this hits us. First, the issue of literal marriage, whether Christians can marry non-Christians. Second, what you might call spiritual intermarriage, the sin of the soul that intermarriage pictures for us.

2. The Literal Sin of Intermarriage

So, the issue of literal marriage. I'm conscious that for a variety of different reasons these words may be hard for some of us to hear. I would love to have something more cheerful to talk about. But God gives us hard words for our good, and I pray this will be for our good today. Here is the simple truth: It is still the case that believers should not marry unbelievers. A Christian must not marry a non-Christian.

I should say that in some important ways, the fact that we're in the New Covenant does change things. We'll think about this more in two weeks, but we are in a better situation in the New Covenant. Wonderfully, by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, a Christian who sins and marries a non-Christian, in the Old Testament that's game over for you, in the New Testament it's not. That's a hard path to walk, but by the grace of God you can repent and walk that path and be faithful in that situation. Wonderfully, in the New Covenant, it is sometimes even the case that a marriage like that leads to the unbeliever converting. It is often the case

that a marriage of a believer and an unbeliever can bring up believing children. We don't see any of that in the Old Testament; but it does happen today. Wonderfully, even though in Ezra's day the solution was divorce, which we'll see in chapter 10 – in the New Covenant, Paul is very clear in 1 Corinthians that the solution is *not* divorce, that a Christian in a religiously mixed marriage needs to stay in it and be faithful and kind and full of love. In all those ways, what we have is better than what they had.

And yet, with all that said, the basic picture still remains the same. When Paul is talking about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, he says to people who have a choice in the matter, if you marry someone they must belong to the Lord. And in 2 Corinthians chapter 6 he gives us the reason why.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Cor 6:14)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Again, worth clarifying, this is not saying that Christians shouldn't have anything to do with non-Christians. Paul is clear we'll be alongside non-Christians all the time, day by day. But a yoke, a yoke is a bar that you put across a pair of oxen so that they pull together. When you've got the yoke on you, you have to pull in the same direction. You plough the same furrow. It's like a three-legged race where you tie your leg to someone else's: you're going to walk in step. So Paul is saying, don't be joined to non-believers in such a way that you have to pull in the same direction. That's a wider principle than just marriage, but it very obviously includes marriage. There is no stronger or more lasting yoke between two people than getting married.

Don't be unequally yoked, says Paul, so that you have to pull in the same direction, because you are fundamentally going in different directions. One of you is in the light, and going further in; the other is in darkness, and headed for darkness. One heading for Christ, the other heading away from him.

And so even though God's grace in the New Covenant is very great, the command remains the same. Don't do this. Don't marry the non-Christian. And in fact, although there are some happy cases where I have seen people do this and God is very gracious and the unbeliever converts to Christ, I have far more often seen the ordinary sad result that disobeying God leads to grief. The unbeliever does not convert, the believer has his or her heart torn in two in their own home, the children grow up in a home where light and darkness share space. And that's actually not the worst case scenario. The worst case scenario, the one Ezra feared, the one that happens over and over again today, is simply that the believer gives up and follows their spouse into hell.

Let me say a brief word to four different groups. Firstly, if you are single, this obviously applies to you, doesn't it. If you are drawn to an unbeliever right now, don't go there. Put Christ first. Treasure Christ. If you are not currently drawn that way, still, guard your heart. Decide now, while you are not tempted, so that you can cut off temptation while it is still weak.

Secondly, children. When you grow up, you will think about getting married. It might seem a long long way off and be very hard to imagine, but it's true! The Bible says that you might not get married, you might stay single, and that can be really good; but most Christians will get married. You need to know, *now*, that if you marry you will marry a Christian. If you go out

with someone as boyfriend and girlfriend, that someone needs to be a Christian. Decide that now, and you will save yourself a lot of sadness.

Thirdly, parents, teach your children this. You will save yourselves a great deal of grief.

And finally, if you're here and you're not a Christian, this probably sounds ridiculously unwelcoming. But that's not it at all. It's just a recognition of reality. You currently don't belong to Jesus; you don't live in his light. But don't hear that as a "not welcome" sign. On the contrary, you are always, always welcome to come in. Come and join us in the light of Christ. We would love to welcome you.

So. These are not easy or comfortable words, are they. But as hard as it might seem to some of you in this moment, God is giving these hard words to you in Ezra 9 for your good, because he loves you. So trust him, and obey him.

3. The Spiritual Sin of Intermarriage

Ezra faced intermarriage and sat appalled in the dust. But as well as thinking about literal marriage, we also need to think about the spiritual significance. When God says, don't commit adultery, he is giving a literal command and he is also providing one of the Bible's deepest pictures of sin. And it's similar with this ban on intermarriage. There is a specific literal sin that points to. But it also is a picture for all of us, married or single, young or old, of our sin. When a Christian sins they are taking a soul that belongs to Christ, that lives in the light, and joining it to darkness and evil. You are taking your soul, which is following Christ on a narrow road, and yoking it to an evil desire that wants to travel that easy broad road. Those are not the same direction! And just like in the Old Testament intermarriage produces unbelieving children, so spiritually, if you yoke your soul to unfaithful desires you will produce unfaithful actions.

There's a little detail that helps us here in verse 2. The holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. What does it mean to be holy? It means to be God's, to belong to him! Where does he live? In heaven. And so what is heavenly has mixed itself with the earth, the holy seed with the people of the lands.

In the same way, you belong to heaven. Spiritually you are seated with Christ now. Heaven is where you are headed, to share his throne, body and soul. You are a holy seed. So don't yoke your soul to earthly things. Don't mix your holiness with a little worldliness. They're like oil and water, they don't go together. They're like chalk and cheese, and that makes your teeth break in your sandwich.

Christian, when you give yourself to sin, when you invite a low desire into your heart, you are spiritually doing the exact thing that put Ezra in the dust. Think of those sins that you're tempted to. Perhaps a sin that even now you're desperately trying to make room for. With that sin in mind, let me finish by taking us to Ezra's prayer. Verse 6.

O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you.

This is a long prayer, and we can't get into the detail. But do you see, here and all the way through, the shame, the humiliation of sin. What a disgrace it is, says Ezra. We sinned already, God's people, and went into exile for it. We know what guilt is like. And we know what

redemption is like, v8, But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, we're back in the land, we've rebuilt the temple, he's not forsaken us, he has set his love on us. After all that, after the guilt and the grace, are we going to go back to the guilt? Verse 14, shall we break your commandments again?

And if that was true for Ezra, and brought him down to the dust in shame, well, brothers and sisters, shouldn't it do that so much more for us? We were in the same guilt, the guilt of man rebelling against God. And God has given us a far bigger grace. Not just favour for a moment, but grace forever. Not just a stone temple, but the church built of living stones. Not just a little relief, but full forgiveness, free and overflowing, honour and glory, the blood of Christ, the Spirit of God. God has held nothing back from us. And now, shall we break your commandments again? Am I going to yoke my precious soul that Christ sweated blood for in the garden, am I going to yoke my soul to that silly soiled little greed or lust or bitterness? What a disgrace, don't you think? What a grief.

And honestly I think that is the great thing that this chapter teaches us. The bitter grief and shame of returning to sin. Do you notice that Ezra doesn't even ask for God's mercy. Normally prayers like this in the Bible end up by going, but please God forgive us. Ezra doesn't even do that. He's too ashamed. We can skip so quickly over this, can't we? I know I'm going to ask for forgiveness, I know God is very gracious, let's not dwell on it. But sometimes it's right to sit in the dust and hang your head and weep. After all your grace, shall I break your commandments again?

One final thing. A very obvious thing, but important. As you look at Ezra sitting in the dust, isn't it remarkable – *he* hasn't done this sin. He hasn't intermarried. It hasn't even happened on his watch, he's just arrived from Babylon. This is not personally Ezra's sin at all, and yet he mourns it as his because his heart is for his people. And there's a lesson there about how we should react when we hear of sin in others. But most of all there's comfort there, because Ezra is a picture for us of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian, when you look at your sin and by God's grace your heart is broken and you mourn it, remember, your king joined his tears to yours. He took your sin as his. He offered up loud cries and tears to God, and he was heard because of his reverence. And his grief is your comfort, and his tears are ointment for your wounds, and his sorrow is your unshakeable peace.

Repentance (Ezra 10)

When Jesus started his ministry, this is what he said: The kingdom of God has come near: *repent* and believe the good news. When the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost and Peter first preached the gospel, he said, *Repent* and be baptised. The Christian life is a life of repentance, turning to God. It starts with a great whole-person repentance; and all through the Christian life there are lots of ongoing repentance for sins large and small.

Well, Ezra chapter 10 gives us a striking picture of repentance. My hope is that this will be a very practical sermon. It might help you to have a sin of yours in mind as we work through this picture of repentance, perhaps some sin you know you need to repent of but haven't yet, or maybe something that you have repented of but you are frequently tempted to and may well fall into again.

Worth saying, as we get into this, that one thing I won't be doing nearly at all is commenting on the specific sin and specific repentance this chapter is dealing with. Ezra and the people of God, 500 years before Jesus, are dealing with the sin of intermarriage, and they deal with it with the very radical surgery of divorce. If you want to know why intermarriage is such a big deal, either ask me afterwards or go and listen to last week's sermon, we dealt with that in some detail. Or if you're worried about those divorces, surely that's not what Christians should do, you're right, this is an Old Testament thing, and we'll be thinking a lot more about that next week, come back then. But this week we're not going to be thinking about any of those specifics of the marriage stuff. Instead we're going to look at them repenting so that we can learn how to repent.

Here's how I want to approach this chapter. Ezra and all the people are sitting around before God, weeping and fasting, and this chap Shecaniah stands up and addresses Ezra. It's clear from your teaching and from God's law what we need to do, he says, these sinful marriages need to be broken up. Again, that will probably trouble a lot of us, how is it that God is commanding divorce here, well, park those thoughts until next week. For now, Shecaniah correctly says, these marriages need to be broken up. And then, in verse 4, he says to Ezra, *Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.*

And then in the rest of the chapter we are told three times that Ezra *arose*. Shecaniah says, arise, and three times Ezra arose. Verse 5, Then Ezra arose. Verse 6, "then Ezra withdrew", but in the original Hebrew that's exactly the same word, "Ezra arose". Verse 10, "then Ezra the priest stood up", again, that's actually the same word, "Ezra arose". So Shecaniah says, "arise", and Ezra rose up three times in response to that call. And we're going to take those three risings as our structure. First Ezra rises and makes the people swear. Then Ezra arises to fast and mourn. And finally Ezra arises to actually do the separating. So we're going to see, first, that repenting involves committing to repentance, actually just deciding to do it. Secondly we'll see that repenting involves confessing our sins to God. And thirdly we'll see that repenting involves putting our sins away. You might be able to tell, none of this is rocket science, but God willing it will be a blessing.

1. Commit to Repentance

So, first, v5.

Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.

The first step in repentance is very simple: it is deciding to repent. By God's grace, I will actually obey.

Now that might seem totally obvious. But Ezra knew that it wasn't. Here they are, all the people crowding round, all weeping. Verse 1, Ezra's there weeping, and a *very great assembly of men, women and children* gather to him, and they join him in weeping. That looks like repentance, doesn't it? That looks like revival. All the people together weeping over their sin. Easy to think, great, their hearts are broken for their sin, we've made clear what repentance looks like, now they'll get on and do it.

Not so fast. Ezra makes them swear. There is a big difference between feeling sorry for your sin and actually doing anything about it. How easy it is to sit listening to a sermon and feel convicted, yes I shouldn't be doing this, yes I should start doing that, oh man, full of sorrow, oh man the Lord's doing some real work on me right now, and then you go home and you think, tomorrow, tomorrow will be the right time to start on that, and you turn on the TV... and that's the end of that. What was the point of that sorrow? What did it achieve? Nothing at all. Actual repentance starts with the commitment to actually repent.

Let me say, to the elders of the church and anyone in any kind of spiritual leadership, parents of children, older women mentoring younger women, whoever you are. If you are trying to help someone repent, particularly if you have authority over them, don't squizzle out of this. I know as a middle-class Brit that I don't like talking about sin and repentance. It's already taken a lot of courage to say to someone, this thing is wrong. You show them in Scripture. Do you see what you need to do? And they go, yes, yes, thank you. And you go, "great, OK, well, moving on." No, don't move on! They need your help. Follow up with that one extra question, "So will you actually do this?"

And to all of us, when you are confronted with your sin, when you feel sorrow in your heart over your failings, don't let it sit as sorrow. It will just curdle in your chest and drop into your stomach as a lead weight of guilt. No, take it to God and say, God, by your grace, give me strength to actually obey. And commit to doing that. Particularly if it is a big sin that involves others, it may well help you to make that commitment in person to another believer. One of the elders, for example. Actual repentance starts with the commitment to actually repent.

2. Confess Your Sin to God

So, v5, Ezra arose and made them swear an oath. Secondly, v6.

Then Ezra withdrew (Ezra arose) from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Ezra rises up and he goes and mourns. He doesn't eat or drink. He's spent the whole day fasting and mourning, and now he carries on through the night. But there's a little detail which helps us see the direction of this mourning. He goes to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. And I don't think the meaning of those names can be an accident. Jehohanan means,

the LORD is gracious. And Eliashib means, God relents. Ezra goes to mourn in the house of God-is-gracious, son of God-relents. Just like Ezra's mourning and fasting in chapter 9 ended with a great prayer of confession, so I think we're meant to see that his mourning here is a mourning of confession, laying out the people's sins in front of a gracious God.

So what is the second step of repentance? Confession. Take that sin to God. Seek his mercy.

Again, that sounds obvious, doesn't it. And yet to our sinful hearts it is often not at *all* obvious. And I think we know that. Imagine your dad has told you to tidy your room. (Some of you might need to cast your minds back a few years.) "Tidy your room", and you go to your room, it's a bit of a mess, but instead of tidying you get distracted and you start playing and actually you make it even more of a mess than it was before. And then suddenly you realise your dad is standing in the doorway. And you could stand up, look him in the eye, and go, I'm sorry dad, I didn't obey you, please forgive me. But you don't do that. Instead you don't make eye contact, you don't look in his face, you mumble something you hope sounds like an apology, you rush around hastily shoving the mess into drawers and under your bed and then still not making eye contact you squeeze past him and run down the stairs.

Very, very often, when we are convicted of sin, we try and sort it out without actually going to the Lord. We rush to step three, where you deal with the sin, hoping that we can sort it out so that when we actually do next talk to the Lord it will all be fine.

But we must go to the Lord. This is a necessary part of repentance. Repentance is turning from your sin to God. If you are not turning *to God* you are not repenting. In Psalm 51, that great prayer of repentance, David says, against you, you only have I sinned. Sin is at heart an offence against God, a slap in God's face. Whatever else you have done, if you haven't gone to God and asked for his forgiveness, your sin has not been dealt with.

And when we do confess, what a joy. We go to the house of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, the-Lord-is-gracious, son of God-relents. He is far more quick to forgive than we are to confess. Go to him.

Here are three quick thoughts on how you might do that in practice.

First, if you're struggling to find the words to pray, use Scripture. You could use Ezra's prayer of confession from chapter 9. Or I mentioned Psalm 51. Go there, read it through, turn those into your words to God. Psalm 51 is a great bit of Scripture to memorise and use through your whole life. God is very kind to you; he even gives you the words you need to seek his mercy.

Second, particularly if it's a bigger sin or a persistent sin, it might well be worth copying Ezra and fasting. We saw in Ezra chapter 8 that fasting is a way of humbling yourself before God. And so it's a very appropriate thing to do when we've sinned. Obviously we're not going to fast after every little thought or stray word, if we did that we'd never eat. But there are times when that practice can be a huge help to our souls.

And third, come to church and confess. Every service here we say words of confession together. Don't let that be an empty time for you. Bring your actual sins to God; name them in your heart; confess them with your lips. And when the person leading the service reads words of assurance from God's words, hear them as the very words of God to you, and be comforted.

3. Obey God and Separate

“Rise up, Ezra!” Ezra rose and made the people swear; Ezra rose and mourned before God; finally, Ezra rose and charged the people to separate. V10:

And Ezra the priest stood up (he arose) and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.”

Repenting means, first, committing to repent; it means, second, confessing to God; and then it means, third, *separating*: obeying God and cutting off your sin. There is no repentance without confession; but equally there is no repentance without obedience.

We see this all through the history of Israel. God would discipline his people, and they’d leap like they’d been stuck with a red-hot poker and they’d come to God and there would be all sorts of promises and commitments to obey, but they didn’t actually get rid of their idols. Or they fasted and wept before God, humbling themselves, but they kept on abusing the poor and breaking the Sabbath. But there is no repentance without obedience. Don’t just listen to the word of God; do what it says.

Now, what this means for you in practice will be as varied as all the different sins people commit. But let me make a few very basic observations. First, the people deal with the sin by ending it. They are in marriages that should not exist and cannot continue, and so they end them. It only takes a very little imagination to see what deep pain and cost is involved there. But they do it. Now praise God, this specific situation, if you’re a Christian married to a non-Christian, that is *not* what God calls you to in the New Covenant. More on that next week. But God still calls Christians to costly repentance. If you are living with or sleeping with someone you shouldn’t be, repentance involves fixing that. Break off the affair and confess it to your spouse, however much that might cost. If you have been stealing, you not only need to stop stealing but you need to return what you stole as far as you are able. If you have spread slander, you not only need to stop but you need to confess to all those who heard it and correct the record. If you have proudly lived life as an atheist or Muslim or gay person, you need to leave that religion and confess that Jesus is Lord. These things can be very costly. But there is no repentance without it.

Secondly, the people deal with their sin under the authority of their leaders. This chapter is a striking picture of the power of the elders, isn’t it? Verse 8, if you don’t show up to this meeting, you forfeit all your property. Well, elders in the New Covenant don’t have that sort of power over your physical life. But the leaders of God’s people are still charged with spiritual authority, to declare to you, this is the word of God, obey it. So on the one hand, if the elders of the church warn you about sin, take that very seriously. And on the other hand, make use of your leaders. If you are stuck in sin, you will often need someone to come and help and give wisdom and comfort and strength. Now, that can be any Christian, there’s certainly no command to confess all your specific sins to the elders. But the leaders of God’s people have been set apart for this specific task, the shepherding of souls. Make use of that. If your soul is stuck in sin, or if you’re worried or confused or ashamed about sin, come and talk, to Joel or Matt or Tim, or me although I’m not an elder yet. We would love to help you.

But some of you might be thinking, all this cutting off sin stuff is all very well, but I have a sin which isn't like that. Maybe it's a sin where it happened, it's been done, and there's no restoration possible, nothing you can do. An abortion, a divorce. Or maybe it's a sin where there's no ongoing sinful *state*, nothing as clear as living with someone, it's just a sin that you keep on falling into over and over. Porn, or a pattern of angry words, or a persistent laziness. Well, if that's you, this chapter still has something to teach you. Because the literal sin of intermarriage points to the spiritual nature of all sin, yoking your precious soul to base desires. And so sending away the wives points us to the cutting off of sin from the soul, the painful deep process of putting your old self to death. If that sin was long ago, confess it to God, receive his forgiveness, and put off all that old bitterness or selfishness or lust. If the sin is something you've repeatedly fallen into, confess it to God, make sure that right now you stand before him with no hidden little intention of going back to it tomorrow, consider what in you keeps you going back to that sin, and seek his grace to help you put that to death. And if you sin the same thing again tomorrow, repent again tomorrow. The Christian life is one of repentance.

4. Look to Christ

Shecaniah said, arise, and Ezra arose three times. Commit to repentance; confess to God; cut off your sins. But I hope you'll indulge me just a little more, because I don't want to leave this passage without seeing Jesus Christ.

You see, in a remarkable way, Christ who had no sin of his own does all these three things. He committed to dealing with sin. It says in Luke's gospel, he set his face for Jerusalem. He was determined to go to the cross, and when people tried to pull him away he shut them down. He confessed to God, mourning and fasting like Ezra, it says in Hebrews 5 he offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. Remember the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus mourned over sin. And finally Jesus cut sin off. He cut sin off in his own body on the cross by cutting himself off; he took our sin on himself and dragged it down with him into the grave, and it is finished.

And I want to say to any of you who may be wavering. You see your sin; you know you should repent; but ah, the cost, it will be painful. I want to say to you: look at Christ. See your Lord set his face for Jerusalem. And won't you set your face for Jerusalem too, won't you set yourself to reach the city of peace? Look at Christ, see your Lord mourn and pray to God with loud cries and tears. Won't you join him, and lift up your voice to God and confess your sin? Look at Christ, see your Lord drink the cup of God's wrath down to the very end, see the nail-marks in his hands and the wound in his side. He cut himself off for you. Won't you cut off your sin for him?

The Newness of the New Covenant (Ezra 9-10)

I want to start by putting Ezra next to Paul. Here is Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor 7:12-16)

You might notice that this passage seems very different from the end of Ezra! Ezra in the Old Testament faces the problem of religious intermarriage, believers married to unbelievers, and the solution is divorce. Paul in the New Testament faces the problem of intermarriage, believers married to unbelievers, and he says, *don't* divorce. As much as it's up to you, stay together, stay faithful. In Ezra, the unbelieving wives are a pollution, you have to separate because otherwise the whole people of God might get corrupted. In 1 Corinthians, it seems to go the other way. If you're a Christian married to a non-Christian, you're not necessarily polluted by them, they're made holy by you!

This is our last look at the Old Testament book of Ezra. As we've worked through it, it's been full of rich food for us, plenty of help for us New Covenant believers. In all sorts of ways God's faithful people from hundreds of years before Jesus have been models for us, teaching us wisdom and priorities and persistence. But in this final sermon I want to use the end of Ezra to show us how much better we have it than they did. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant. God gave a lot of grace to his Old Covenant people; he has given far, far more grace to us. And I hope putting Ezra and 1 Corinthians together will give us a helpful handle on that, so that we go away rejoicing.

Here's how we're going to approach this. Starting in Ezra 10, I want to give you an overview of a deep theme in the Old Testament, that uncleanness spreads more than holiness. Evil is more infectious than good. Then we're going to look at our Lord Jesus Christ and see how when he arrives on earth things change. Holiness is suddenly infectious, catching, in a new way. And then we'll land in 1 Corinthians 7 and see how that change spreads out in the church and impacts the details of our lives.

1. Holiness and Uncleanness in the Old Covenant

So, Ezra 10. We've spent a couple of weeks on this story already, but just a brief recap. Ezra, the great teacher of Israel, a scribe skilled in the Law of God, comes back from Babylon to Jerusalem, and when he arrives he's told, the people have sinned greatly, they've married foreign wives. The issue here, we saw two weeks ago, is not a race issue: there's no ban anywhere in Scripture on marrying someone from another race. The issue is religious; these foreign wives come from other religions, and they still worship other gods with their abominations, and so the holy people is all mixed up with unholy peoples. And we saw two

weeks ago that the basic principle there, that believers in the true God should not marry unbelievers, has always applied right through the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, and it still applies today. If you're a Christian, don't marry a non-Christian.

But then in chapter 10 they actually deal with the problem. And the way they deal with it is divorce. The men who've married foreign wives have to send those wives away, and if they've had children together, the children have to go too. Last week we thought about how this is a pretty sobering illustration for us of how deep repentance goes, serving the Lord sometimes means some pretty deep cuts. But lots of Christians reading this passage have asked themselves, OK kudos to them for doing something so hard, but was it actually right? Doesn't God hate divorce? Isn't marriage meant to be for life? Doesn't Paul specifically say in 1 Corinthians that if you're a believer married to a non-believer then you should stay together? But then you go and read Ezra again and it seems really obvious that it *was* right. Ezra is the great guy who is skilled in the Law, and v3 they're doing it because they fear the Lord and they're doing it according to the Law.

The key thing to get here is that in the Old Testament, uncleanness and holiness work differently. Ezra did the right thing *then*, in his situation; our situation is different.

In the Old Testament, uncleanness spreads further and easier than holiness. Uncleanness comes from all sorts of places, and it catches and it spreads. Dead bodies are unclean, but so are various sicknesses, lots of animals. Dogs are unclean, not a lot of pet dogs in Old Testament Israel. Mould in your house is unclean. Just a whole bunch of things. And this stuff spreads. So suppose I work in a funeral home and I have to touch a dead body, getting it ready for burial. That makes me unclean. But it doesn't just make me unclean; if I leave work and I meet you on the way home and I shake your hand, hello, boom, you're unclean too! You could think of uncleanness like dirt, or germs. It spreads easily.

But holiness – holiness is harder. Holiness only comes from one place; it comes from the presence of God in the tabernacle. There is a whole world full of unclean things; there is only one holy place. And holy things do spread holiness, but they only spread it a little bit. Suppose I'm a priest, and I'm dealing with sacrifices in God's temple, and I touch some of the holy meat from the offering. Does that make me holy? Yes it does. But suppose I'm then on my way home from work and I see you and I shake your hand – nothing. No zap, no change. You're just how you were before. The holiness doesn't spread as far and as easily as the uncleanness. By the way, I didn't make those examples up, they come straight out of Haggai chapter 2, where he's making this exact point. Holiness doesn't spread as easily as uncleanness.

And what that means is, in a world with only one source of holiness and loads of sources of uncleanness, where holiness doesn't spread as far as uncleanness, what are you going to get? Well, you're going to get nearly the whole world unclean, and that one little spark of holiness keeps going, the holiness grows a little, pegged back, grows and shrinks back, and never gets very far. Just a little flickering light in a vast sea of darkness. And that's exactly what happens. That's the story of Israel, isn't it, the story of the Old Testament. In that world, you need guardrails to keep the holy things from getting spoilt by the unclean things. And that's the job of the priests, we're told in Leviticus 10:10:

You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.

So, that's the scene in the Old Testament. Two quick comments before we move on to Jesus. First, do you see that this makes sense of Ezra chapter 10. The holy seed has mixed itself with the people of the lands. Holiness has mixed up with uncleanness. If God's people is to have any hope, there must be a separation. That's the priest's job. And so in Ezra 10, you might have noticed as we read the whole thing last week, there's a real emphasis on priests. Ezra charges the priests to lead the way. The priests who sinned are listed first. And Ezra himself is specifically called "Ezra the priest" as he stands up to speak to the people. As Ezra does that separating, he's doing the priestly work of separating holy from unclean. It's not each man for himself, shall I keep my wife or not. It's God's appointed priest separating holiness from uncleanness, light from darkness.

Second, there's one important way that we might mishear this. Don't hear me saying that uncleanness is *stronger* than holiness. No, holiness is the strongest thing in the world. Holiness is the quality of God himself. In a face-to-face between holiness and uncleanness, holiness blows uncleanness off the face of the earth and just leaves some scorch marks behind. No, the issue is us. Think of uncleanness like dirt, and holiness like electricity. Which is stronger? Definitely electricity. Which one does a rag of cloth pick up more easily? Dirt. It's a lot easier to make a rag filthy than it is to get a current flowing through it. And that's what we're like, naturally. Uncleanness, all kinds of filthiness, find a natural home in us. Holiness is a much stronger thing, but it's not our kind of strong thing. And so you find, over and over again in the Old Testament, there's nothing wrong with God's holiness, but there's a lot wrong with God's people.

2. The Arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ

But then we turn over the page and get to the New Testament and meet Jesus and everything changes. We get it in scene after scene. A crowd is around Jesus, wanting to get near him, wanting to hear him, but then suddenly they start scattering. Like the wrong end of a magnet, a man is walking through the crowd toward Jesus and in front of this man everyone splits and scatters and give him all the space he needs. Because he's a leper, a walking talking pit of uncleanness. You see a leper, covered in their skin disease, and you feel fear and pity and disgust. If you're kind you might throw them some bread. But what you don't do is touch them, because as soon as you touch them you become unclean. This man walks up to Jesus, and falls at his feet. If you're willing, he says, you can make me clean.

And Jesus is deeply moved, indignant in the face of this uncleanness, and he goes, I am willing, and he reaches out and touches him. And that touch should mean uncleanness spreads to Jesus as well, sticking like dirt. But instead, something goes the other way, like a shock of electricity. Jesus stays clean; but in that moment the man is clean too. Healed.

We keep getting the same thing. A woman with persistent bleeding, unclean, she touches Jesus, and power goes out *from* him *to* her. He goes into a house where a dead girl is lying, goes up to the bed, takes her hand, up you get little girl, and up she gets. Uncleanness, death, doesn't stick to him; instead life flows from him.

But it's not just the miracles. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, and they turn from their sin. The scandalous woman repents and washes Jesus' feet with her tears. Zacchaeus gives

half his wealth to the poor and gives back everything he stole with interest. Where Jesus goes, holiness goes.

And what we are seeing in all these stories is that Jesus is something new. Jesus, God and man, filled with the Holy Spirit, *is* holiness and *gives* holiness in a way we've never seen before. When the Pharisees criticise him for eating with sinners, he doesn't tell them that they should have been eating with sinners too. They were quite right not to eat with sinners, because they were Old Testament, and holiness has to stay away from uncleanness. No, when they criticise him, Jesus tells them that they haven't understood who *he* is. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. In the Old Testament, uncleanness spreads more easily than holiness. But I'm here now, and everything's changed.

3. A Better Covenant

And so we come to us. When this Jesus, this new man, the holy one who cleans with a touch, when he brings in a New Covenant, what is that covenant like? I will tell you. It is *better*. So much better. The risen Lord Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of holiness, from his Father and pours it out on his people. And so you and I have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of holiness. Born again by the Spirit; raised spiritually to new life. And now we are holy. That's why the standard New Testament word to describe every Christian is *saint*. Saint means sanctified, holy. In the Old Covenant, you had a big unholy people of God with a few saints in it; in the New Covenant, we are a holy people.

In the Old Covenant, uncleanness spread more easily than holiness because of what we were like. Like an old cloth, we pick up dirt more easily than we carry electricity. But now we're remade, new hearts, and holiness fits us. We can still go and get dirty; it is possible to quench the Spirit; but now holiness fits us. We conduct electricity, if you like!

And the remarkable results are all over the New Testament if you stop to look at them. Take this issue of religious intermarriage. In the Old Covenant, if you're a believer and you're married to an unbeliever, that's it for you. Game over. And the fruit of your marriage will be children who do not follow the Lord. Again (after *maybe* the book of Genesis where things are a bit different) there is no example in the Old Testament of a child from a mixed marriage growing up to be a believer. It just doesn't happen. And so the solution to those marriages is what you get in Ezra 10: divorce.

Then in the New Covenant, what do we find? Well, it's still the case that Christians shouldn't marry non-Christians, we thought about that in some detail two weeks ago. Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. *But*, if a believer and an unbeliever actually are married to each other, what then? Totally opposite solution: don't divorce. As far as it's up to you, stick with it. And that's because there's a new situation. Instead of uncleanness spreading through that marriage, holiness is spreading. 1 Corinthians 7:14:

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

In some sense, that unbelieving spouse is marked out as holy, they come under the sovereign claim of King Jesus. And that may even result in them converting and coming to

faith. And similarly the kids are holy, and although this is by no means guaranteed, they may grow up faithful even in that mixed home. Again, that does not happen in the Old Testament. But it does in the New. Timothy was the son of a believing mother and unbelieving father, and he grew up to be Paul's right-hand man.

Isn't that a rich comfort? If you are a Christian married to a non-Christian, that is a hard road. You need to cling to Christ for all you're worth. And yet, how kind he is. By his grace, by the power of his Holy Spirit in you, you can walk that road to the end. By his grace, your children may grow up believers; you can pray for that in hope. By his Holy Spirit, your husband or wife may be saved too. In the Old Testament, Ezra nearly despaired at intermarriage, and the solution was divorce. But you can walk in faith and hope. What Jesus has given us is better.

And I think this one very specific difference we see between the covenants, that specific difference over intermarriage, illustrates for all of us what Christ has given. It's not complete yet; it's only the firstfruits. You still have a sinful nature, the old man; you can still catch the dirt and uncleanness of sin. But you have been given a new heart, and now you conduct electricity; you can carry holiness as something natural to you. Holiness fits you. That sin might feel like it sticks so much. But the holiness God is working in you already has a home; you are made ready for it. You can grow up into it naturally. And you can pray and fight with such confidence; the Spirit is in you, and the Spirit will win.

As we look beyond our own little battles to the church, our own little congregation and the church in this country and the whole world, we long for great and big things, people converting and maturing and being faithful. As we long and pray for a faithful and maturing church to be part of, you can do that with good confidence. The Lord has given his Spirit to his church, and holiness now lives in her. As we look at an unclean world, we don't need to fear it, because the Spirit that is in us is stronger than the spirit that is in the world.