

THE PROMISE OF RESTORATION

Steve Overman

October, 2017

I thought this little paper could be used as a summary of the five part preaching series we are pursuing in church, as a way to look up various Scriptures which pertain to the story and themes, or perhaps as a rough guide for your own journey.

Steve Overman

A NOTE ON READING EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

Sometimes when modern people read Ezra and Nehemiah they can become pre-occupied with questions about the precise historical unfolding of the events, historical gaps in the story, the precise relationship between the persons of Ezra and Nehemiah and so forth. While historical and literary questions have their place, I think it helps to consider that the compilers of these stories are not trying to pass on to us a precise and exhaustive historical narrative of the times. Instead they have gathered and passed on to us key episodes which reflect some of the important themes in the journey of recovery and restoration.

HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF EXILE AND RESTORATION

Repeated unwitting but real failure to exercise the pro-active care suggested in the Instructions of Moses, despite ongoing warnings from the prophets over many years, resulted in increased weakness and ultimate damage, loss and displacement. The overwhelming and lasting psychological impact of the Exile on Israel can hardly be overstated, including shock, pain, shame, and threatened loss of hope.

931 BCE Kingdom Divides into North (“Israel”) and South (“Judah”), I Kings 12-14

721 BCE Northern Kingdom (“Israel”) Falls to Assyria, 2 Kings 15-17

586 BCE Fall of Southern Kingdom and Jerusalem to Babylon – Exile, 2 Kings 24-25

538 BCE Return and Restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra-Nehemiah

SITUATION (> = “leads to”)

The pattern observed in the fall of both the North and South is also a pattern observed in our own lives. It’s characterized by long, incremental decrease and the slow building of intense crisis, culminating in final pressure and ultimately, when it blows up, the devastating impact of damage, loss and destruction. From such a process the psychological results of grief, hurt, pain, shame and the like ensue. We are in “captivity” with no apparent way of escape. We are deeply sad, drowning in shame, with no apparent future.

Weakness (largely undetected) > Stress (of various kinds – internal (division, poverty, confusion) and external (enemies, drought/famine, etc.), which led to more internal, ie cycle > damage, hurt, pain (and its attendant symptoms, also a cycle) > Impoverishment/“A Diminished Life” > Loss >

Dislocation/Captivity (shame, disorientation, depression) > Devastation > Loss of hope (Huge! Human beings cannot live without hope.).

APPLICATION: In this life we sometimes find ourselves in this serious and difficult situation:

Marriage
Family
Finances
Relationships

TYPICAL RESPONSES

In the face of such damage, loss and pain, you try to address the perceived problems. But it seems every time you try to address them, fix them or make them better, the attempts fail or even seem to make them worse.

You think (seriously) of outwardly giving up – suicide or desertion; but if you give up, it will hurt others (the kids, a spouse, others).

Most then courageously, heroically, endure in such a state by means of denial, minimization, compensation or even just shutting down.

What can we say to these realities? Life is terribly difficult and complex, and we should not glibly write off God given coping mechanisms such as these, which do have their proper place. Nevertheless, we can reach for more than mere coping. Gingerly, respectfully and with an appropriate degree of realism we can reach for “The Promise of Restoration.” (Though there is something of an order for them, the following components do not neatly unfold one after another but rather interact synergistically throughout the deepening cycles of long term restoration.)

THE PROMISE OF RESTORATION:

1. MOURNFUL PENITENCE

(Ezra 3:12; 8:21ff; 10:1ff; Neh.1:3-11; 8:9; 9:6ff; Dan.9:1ff; Joel 2:12ff.; Lamentations of Jeremiah; Psalms of Lament (eg Ps.137); 2 Cor. 7:8-11)

Though denial, minimization, ignorance, compensation, shutting down and the like play legitimate roles in short term survival, they are not the ultimate way to fullness of life. Real restoration begins with repentance.

Fully embracing a true gift of repentance is tough; it will go far deeper than you think. It will be painful, hurting as much or more than the present pain itself. It’s ongoing, digging deeper and deeper into your own psyche. It will be scary, because as the true depth and dimensions of failure are exposed, you may fear the loss of all hope.

Yet, fully embracing a true gift of repentance is absolutely necessary. Without it, there truly is no hope. You can’t fix a problem until you accurately and fully face it. Without conviction and confession there is no consolation. Partial conviction and confession results in partial consolation. Full consolation comes through a long, painful, protracted process where realities

are completely uncovered and brought into the light. For Christians this process never ends, lasting a lifetime.

It is God's gift to expose faults we can't see, but we must do our part. We must position ourselves to regularly receive the penetration of prophetic Word; live in the light of ongoing, genuine and forthright Community; maintain an open, honest and pliable heart; and find the courage and determination to endure not in denial, minimization or shut down, but in the lifelong process of repentant living.

To repent means to listen, to embrace, to respond, to take responsibility. It means to appropriately grieve and mourn. In this regard, the modern Evangelical penchant for banishing sorrow is at odds with the grief of Nehemiah or Ezra, the sorrowful repentance prayers of Nehemiah, Ezra and Daniel, the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the Psalms of Lament, the sorrow of Jesus and the many ancient traditions which prescribe an important place for grief and mourning in the healing process. Somehow, with the help of God's Spirit and whatever interactions are necessary, we need always to summon the courage and take the time to fully "survey" (Neh.2:12ff) the damage, loss and depth of our mistakes, giving proper place to the sorrow, grief and even deep sobbing that naturally results from our realizations and reflections.

Of course, as Paul points out in 2 Cor.7:8-11 "the sorrow of the world" can bury you forever in hopeless grief. But "godly sorrow" is the foundation of a true and deep repentance that leads to renewal.

2. SOVEREIGN PROMISE, PROCLAMATION AND PROVISION

In the midst of damage, loss, dislocation and all the attendant psychological devastations, in the fear, uncertainty and strangeness of a strange land, the Lord speaks surprising and strong words, promising a return in due time:

For thus says the Lord, "After seventy years are accomplished in Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word toward you, causing you to return to this place. For I, myself, know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

(Jeremiah 29:10-11)

Sitting in "Babylon," naturally figuring that all is lost, we feel deep pain, embarrassment and regret for the mistakes of ourselves or others that we now realize have led to this tragic place. It is a shock for us to hear an authoritative word informing us that, even though we are out of place, God's plans are still in place for us: "No one else would even think this; no one else even knows. I myself know the plans I have for you. Though you find yourself in this strange land of dislocation and hurt, in due time I WILL BRING YOU BACK."

As a consequence of the failures, those plans may end up looking differently than they might have before but they are still in place and, though different in appearance, they will enjoy the rich blessing of God's presence within them.

God's promise of restoration is coupled with a sovereign proclamation authoritatively publishing his will in response to the loss that has taken place:

“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred the spirit of Cyrus King of Persia so he made a proclamation throughout his kingdom saying, “Thus says Cyrus King of Persia, The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among all his people? His God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (he is the God), which is in Jerusalem.”

(Ezra 1:1-3)

Both accounts of the beginning of restoration, in Ezra and in Nehemiah, note not only authorizing proclamations from kings Cyrus and Artaxerxes but also royal provision of protection and materials for the work (Ezra 1:1-11; Neh. 2: 1-9) This authorization for restoration is consistent with the character and will of the God revealed in the scriptures, one who wills and promises recovery and restoration for all of creation. The provision is consistently promised as well.

Sitting in a strange place of pain and loss, we might well wonder on what basis we can possibly muster the courage and determination necessary to return and rebuild. Knowledge of this Sovereign, cosmic decree of the King provides us with such a basis. We can take on the task because the King has declared it to be his will and promised to provide all that’s needed for its fulfillment. Rather than resign myself to denial or some other survival technique alone, I can and will pursue the task of restoration because it is God’s will and call.

When the enemy, my brothers and sisters, or even my own soul question the basis for this project or despair of adequate resources to finish the long, hard work, I can appeal to that authoritative decree (“I have a note from the King!”), and count on that royal provision: “But my God shall supply all your needs, according to his riches in glory, by Christ Jesus” (Phil.4:19).

3. SCRIPTURAL PROGRAM

If the combination of visible damage and the penetration of God’s revelation have brought us to an openness to change, and we have become convinced of God’s will, promise and provision, we should begin by “returning” to God’s good guidance: “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” (Ps.119:105).

Sitting in Babylon, the people had plenty of time to reflect back on how they ever got there. Very soon, they began to seek out and assemble copies of the Law of Moses and the words of some of the prophets whose calls and warnings they had ignored. And Ezra, the first great “scribe” led the way:

“And Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a ready scribe of the Law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given....For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances.”

(Ezra 7:6a, 10).

As you read some of the later sections of both Ezra and Nehemiah, for example the classic scene depicted in Neh.8:1-18, you can see not only the seriousness with which they realized their error, but also the courage and strength it took to open up and listen to a Word that at once both slew and healed.

Yet this is the process to which we are called. For as Ezra rightly understood, a return to right worship - that is, not only public expression of devotion, but the conduct of our daily lives - is the foundation for a rebuilt life. The Scriptures not only provide vision and promise but also fundamental direction for the kind of attitudes and conduct with which God's blessing can partner.

Of course, in the context of our deep regret and determination to never again fail to fully follow the Scriptures there is the danger of over-reacting and becoming hyper zealous legalists or nit pickers of the Word. And this is a serious danger, one to which the scribal tradition in time fell victim, producing a system which ironically tended toward a different kind of damage and destruction: The damage of a false religious system based on a legalistic approach to the Scriptures. Still, the larger strokes of Scripture, interpreted and taught by Jesus himself, through God's Spirit, are key to the rebuilding of any new season of life.

4. WILLING PEOPLE

Not everyone will hear the call to return and rebuild; but many will make the decision and be willing to pay the price. Though each of us must make that decision for ourselves – and God's promise, proclamation and provision are our ultimate points of confidence – the work of restoration is not a solo endeavor.

Even though we may all bear different degrees of personal responsibility for the failures of the past, since we are all bound together, none of us sins in isolation and we all get restored together. The nature of systemic sin within family units, faith communities or the world is so complex and insidious it can only be completely conquered through a coordinated, joint effort. It is important to try to take care of any known, "unfinished business," and not skate over issues that need to be addressed. But we should avoid becoming mired in "the blame game". Despite repentance's commitment to discover and accept responsibility, even with the gracious in-breaking of revelatory truth, we will always be limited in our ability to exhaustively or accurately know the past. In the end, we are all involved and we can all repent together and try to make things better.

Living together provides the light necessary to continue to expose areas of darkness that rob us of fullness. Of course, it's more difficult, messy, inconvenient and even painful to try to, "do it together." But the alternative is hellish isolation, and that won't do. It is through the messiness, inconvenience and even pain of Community that we discover ourselves and the fullness of resource needed to finish the task.

Attacks from resident forces who with diabolical desperation desire to maintain the status quo and the sheer variety of tasks making up the long term work likewise signal the promise of restoration can only be realized in Community. Somehow, as we learn to live, work and "fight" together for our future, each of us taking up those aspects of the task we've been given, the large scale work of restoration, personal and corporate is accomplished (Neh.3).

5. PRACTICAL REALITIES

The idea of seeking to pursue restoration in the face of obstacles which have to this point proven insurmountable finds solid warrant in the nature of God, the promise of scripture and the experiences of life. In the end, it's better to face reality than spend our lives attempting to avoid it. But the work of restoration is not for the faint of heart.

Ask anyone who is attempting to work on a troubled marriage, beginning to confront an abusive dynamic that has operated in a family system for generations, wrestling with the complexities of building a new life in a blended family, dealing with an addiction, working for reconciliation with a person from whom they're estranged, or seeking to heal the dynamics of a faith community that has been messed up for years: Once we begin to pursue the process of restoration, we will at many points encounter setbacks and discouragements which will require effective counteraction.

- **Appearances**

After a long, difficult, initial season of work, finally some results began to appear. But when the people gathered to look at the new foundation of the new temple, while some felt joy there was for others an almost crippling admixture of sadness: "It's small"; "You mean, with all this hard work over such a long period of time, this is all we've accomplished?" "It will never be as nice as the original." (Ezra 3:8-13; 4:24-25; 5:1)

In times like these, when the new seems so small and not as nice as what used to be, the restoration prophets need to be heard:

"Do not despise the day of small beginnings"
(Zechariah 4:10)

"Who is there remaining among you who remembers the first house and its glory? And how do you see this new one that is being built? It seems like nothing in comparison, does it not? Yet now be strong, all of you, and continue to work, for I am with you...and I will fill this house with glory...the glory of this present and new house will be greater than the glory of the former. And in this house, I will give peace (wholeness)."

(Haggai 2:3-9)

The new will be different and will not look the same as the old; but it can be even more glorious because the Lord will be in it in a special way, and that makes all the difference.

- **"Agains"**

When we hear stories of restoration rehearsed, we often fail to notice the builders of newness experienced many setbacks along the way. Therefore, when we make the same mistakes over again or fall into the same old destructive patterns, we despair and are tempted to give up hope.

To be realistic, we must understand that the rebuild will not be accomplished in a day. Old patterns die hard, and new patterns must be constructed a brick at a time. When we are frustrated to find ourselves or others falling into the same damaging patterns, we must not become discouraged. Instead, we should stop, identify (again!) the attitudes or behaviors tending toward death and create new healthy habits for Life. Over and over again.

▪ Adversaries

Finally, if we are to be truly realistic and ultimately effective in accomplishing the great, redemptive work of restoration, we must understand the diabolical desperation with which the enemy will oppose our efforts. Whether you believe in personal demons or not, most who have begun to confront the complex chemistries of generational bondage within family systems, the insidious dynamics of abuse or the increasingly confused relational breakdowns that we sometimes experience in life would agree: There are force fields in reality to which we do not have direct access that sometimes seem to be beyond our ability to control.

As if the long, hard work of repenting, removing rubble, learning new ways and constructing new paths weren't enough, it's clear that the builders of the New Jerusalem also had to deal with ongoing and diverse attacks from the enemy. The resistance was so relentless that, "Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other" (Neh.4:17). To stay encouraged and unified they needed to regularly hear the prophets and gather themselves together whenever they heard the sound of the trumpet (aka "going to church").

Unauthorized former residents of the territory now being rebuilt will not go down without a fight. Don't fight against each other; fight together against the enemy of our souls. And never give up:

"Do not be afraid of them: remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers and sisters, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes!"

(Nehemiah 4:14)

A PRAYER FOR RESTORATION

"O Lord, our Father, though you have been so unceasingly good to us, we have been foolish and unfaithful to you, to ourselves and to others. And now we are experiencing the flawed fruits of our sinful thoughts and deeds. Unwittingly and yet patently ignoring your Word, we have tragically failed to be faithful. And now, we are experiencing damage, loss and destruction. We are sad, disoriented, dislocated and ashamed. It is difficult for us to go on.

Please grant to us a gift of repentance, fully exposing the actual Reality of the situation. In due time give us the wisdom with which to proceed –put it in our heart, as you did in Nehemiah's. Please put it also in the heart of all with whom we work and all our friends everywhere.

We believe you have called us to return, recovery and restoration and that you will provide all we need to ceaselessly work to see it take place, bit by bit, through all setbacks, disappointments and discouragements." Amen.