

## When God Brings the Spring

Ezra 1-3

Bellevue Baptist Church

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Today, we begin a three-week series in the book of Ezra—one of those Old Testament stories that doesn't get much airtime in the church, and yet its message may be more relevant than most of us realize. If you're new to the Bible, it might be helpful to get your bearings and see how this story fits into the grand storyline of Scripture.

The Bible is made up of 66 books which were written by 40+ authors, spanning a story that covers about 6000 years. Though these words were penned by human beings, the individuals were carried along by the Spirit, writing down exactly what the Lord wanted them to say. For this reason, the Bible is often referred to as the "inspired" word of God.

As you can see, the Old Testament is made up of 39 books, all telling the story of a coming Messiah, a Savior that would day enter our space and time to save us from our sins. Genesis is the book of beginnings and Malachi is the final word from God before the New Testament begins with Jesus' birth.

The New Testament contains 27 books, beginning with the 4 eyewitness accounts of his life, "The Gospels", and after those, a single history book called Acts, then a series of letters, mostly written by a man named Paul. Then the Bible ends with a future-oriented book called Revelation—the most difficult book of the Bible to understand. Many of its mysteries will only be comprehended in eternity.

So going back to the Old Testament, you can see where Ezra sits.

The story is set in a season of recovery. The people had been hauled off by foreign enemies—all their dreams squashed as their country became unstable and their homes left empty like the rapture had already happened.

After decades of living in a foreign land, the Jewish identity had largely been lost. Their culture, their music, their temple worship—the rhythms of their lives suddenly hijacked, like ours were in COVID. But now, it's like the pandemic is over. God is showing signs of restoring the Jews to their former place. The people have been humbled

I want you to see what happens in these first three chapters, as the winter passes to spring, and God does this new thing. There are three big markers we see...

## **When God Brings the Spring**

## 1. **There is a sovereign stirring behind the scenes. (1:1)**

As the book opens, the Lord stirs the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to do the unthinkable:

**In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and to put it in writing... Ezr 1:1**

Notice how every great awakening begins with God's initiation. Though events on Earth may sometimes feel accidental, there is a master plan the Lord is playing out.

This unbelieving ruler has no idea that he's a pawn in God's chess game. The Lord lays it on his heart: let the Jewish leave your empire and return to their homeland. It's time to rebuild. And when they arrive back in their homeland, they will realize in an instant: this is not a remodeling project. It's brand new construction.

Like Moses taking the people from Egypt to the Promised Land, Ezra is one of the leaders of the return to Jerusalem, a city that sits in ruins, a temple now turned to rubble. The Lord is ready to begin again. He's ready to bring change.

Change feels like a dirty word to many Christians. The older I get, the more I understand this. Many of the changes that have taken place in our country, and in Christianity, have felt sad to me. In many ways, I wish we could go backward instead of forward.

I wish men gathered in stadiums to worship the Lord, like they did back in the day of Promise Keepers. That movement changed many lives—my own being heavily impacted. But Promise Keepers attendance peaked in 1997 with more than 850,000 men in one stadium and millions involved across the movement. But annual attendance dropped sharply by the early 2000s, and the movement largely dissolved by 2003–2004.

I wish we could return to the day when Sundays were highly protected from outside interference.

Church attendance in America has been declining decade after decade. In 1999, about **70% of Americans reported regular church attendance**. Today that number is closer to **45–50%**. Among Millennials and Gen Z, weekly attendance is even lower—with less than 30% attending weekly in some national surveys.

I wish we could go back to when politics was a topic two people could discuss with disrespect. Recent Pew Research studies show that over 80% of Americans believe political divisions are widening, and nearly two-thirds describe members of the opposing party as “immoral” or “dishonest.” Polarization continues to intensify.

In many ways, I wish we could rewind the clock.

But that is not how life works. Time marches on, and we have to embrace our historical moment. But here is the good news—as we honor the past, and grieve what is lost, we discover that the Lord is always ready to do a new thing.

In the book of Habakkuk, the Lord says,

**“Look at the nations and watch—  
and be utterly amazed.  
For I am going to do something in your days  
that you would not believe,  
even if you were told. Hab. 1:5**

Bellevue, it is our job to pray—to seek God’s face and ask for a time of revival to come in our country, in our city, and in our church. It’s our job to ask God to do something we would not believe, even if we were told. This is what it means to live by faith, and not by sight.

Now I want you to see what happens next in the story of Ezra. God initiates the revival by prompting King Cyrus. The match was struck. Now, look...

## **2. There is a visible stirring in the hearts of ordinary people. (1:5-6)**

A movement does not catch fire because one leader says “go.” It catches fire when a group of people say “yes” to God.

Listen to what Ezra records:

**So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the Lord’s house in Jerusalem. All their neighbors supported them, with silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering.” Ezra 1:5–6**

Notice the phrase: *everyone whose spirit God had roused*.

Not a single priest or pastor. Not a small committee. Not a handful of influencers. A large group of people gets stirred by God. This is how revival spreads. It moves from a sovereign stirring behind the scenes to a visible stirring in the hearts of ordinary people.

There's an old saying: God equips the called. When He lays a vision on the hearts of His people, He also lays it on their hearts to put resources behind it. People begin to give in ways they've never given before.

And it's not just the wealthy with large portfolios. It's plumbers and teachers and retirees and business owners and college students. When God moves, everyone leans in. Now why does He do it this way?

God could drop manna from heaven like He did in the wilderness. He could speak resources into existence like He spoke the stars into the sky. He could place a box in the Worship Center tomorrow filled with everything we would ever need.

But He doesn't. Throughout Scripture, when God begins something new, He calls His people to greater commitment. He asks them to put skin in the game.

Why? Because Jesus said it plainly: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

When you give to something, when you sacrifice for something, when you invest personally in something—what happens? Your heart follows your investment. You value what you've paid for.

Years ago, researchers discovered something fascinating about furniture. They asked: What pieces of furniture do people tend to keep around the longest? You might assume it would be the most expensive, high-end items. But the opposite was true. People were most likely to keep the furniture they assembled themselves—especially those things from IKEA, because they took so long to build. Like a 3000 piece Lego set..

The more effort we put into something, the more we value it.

And that's what we see in Ezra. God rouses the spirits of the people, and then He invites them to give sacrificially—everyone included—to move the vision forward. When a congregation sacrifices together, they don't just fund a project. They own it. And that is when a new work of God truly begins.

One of the remarkable moments in the history of Bellevue was when this church sensed the Lord leading it to build this campus right off the interstate. If you watch the old footage, you'll see members putting envelopes into a large wooden box, called the Chest of Joash. In these envelopes were memories they had

journalled from 86 years at the old location. They were symbolically saying: “we aren’t throwing away the precious moments. We are taking them with us to the new land God has provided.

Once the treasure chest of memories was filled, they organized a march from downtown to this location. The new campus was the Canaan land, the land that God had called them to take possession. The march took careful planning. The box would travel a certain distance, then it would spend the night at someone’s house, where there would be a prayer meeting planned. The next morning, it would resume until it reached the gates of our property.

Then a groundbreaking day was planned, based on the story of the Old Testament when God’s people took over the land. As you may recall, when the spies were sent into the land, that group came back with mixed reports. Some said that the people living in that land were too large to overcome—that they would be like grasshoppers in the land.

Dr. Rogers had a theatrical mind and so he requested that a group of deacons be dressed that day like grasshoppers, giving their lame reports. Then the giants of the land were bulldozed over (video 10:47-11:10.) Those giants represented sins that would stand between the people of God and the will of God. A bulldozer knocked all of them over.

Now, to us today, watching this old footage feels a little hokey, like all of our old family tapes, some of it makes us laugh—I can’t believe we thought that was cool! But it was special to those people in that era. Those memories are a treasure because the spirit of faith and hope was not held in the hearts of the Rogers family, but the whole congregation.

When God brings the spring, he moves in the hearts of ordinary people. That’s us.

But there is a third step when God does a new thing.

### **3. There is momentum when memory bows to mission. (3:10-13)**

Once the altar is rebuilt and the foundation is laid, something unexpected happens. The trumpets sound. The singers lift their voices. And some shout for joy... while other people, the older people, start to cry.

Let’s read what happens next in Ezra chapter 3. Listen to v.10...

<sup>10</sup> When the builders had laid the foundation of the Lord’s temple, the priests, dressed in their robes and holding trumpets, and the Levites descended from Asaph, holding

cymbals, took their positions to praise the Lord, as King David of Israel had instructed.<sup>11</sup> They sang with praise and thanksgiving to the Lord: “For he is good; his faithful love to Israel endures forever.” Then all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord because the foundation of the Lord’s house had been laid.

**<sup>12</sup> But many of the older priests, Levites, and family heads, who had seen the first temple, wept loudly when they saw the foundation of this temple, but many others shouted joyfully. <sup>13</sup> The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shouting from that of the weeping, because the people were shouting so loudly. And the sound was heard far away. Ezra 3:10–13**

Now just take a moment and consider what God is doing here.

Why would the older people cry? Why wouldn’t they be the ones with the most joy, since the worship they remembered as children was now returning? Why were they sad when they should have been happy?

The answer: because human beings have a hard time letting go of former glory. It’s not just Bellevue—it’s every church. Whenever a group of people are moved by God to accomplish incredible feats, that moment in history becomes ingrained in their hearts. They will never forget that moment, nor would they want to forget what God did back then.

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld makes light of this reality—that we all tend to get stuck in the past. He once said:

**"You can tell what was the best year of your father's life, because they seem to freeze that clothing style and ride it out." — Jerry Seinfeld**

It’s true! We all have a tendency to freeze time in those moments when we hit a peak. For many of you, it was during a previous season of Bellevue that you felt the most pronounced, palpable presence of the Holy Spirit. You remember giving sacrificially, in a way that hurt and forced you to trust God, and it paid off because God brought a season of revival in you and in the church. You never want to forget that day.

As the church moves forward, as it reaches new people and forms new traditions, the older people wrestle with the grief saying in their hearts: the new generation has forgotten!

The text says that the younger people were crying tears of joy when they saw the foundation laid for the new temple. They were ecstatic to see God moving afresh in their day. The older people were just as loud, but they were crying tears of sadness, because the new temple was smaller than Solomons, and the truth came crashing home—God is not going to rewind the tape and replay the past. They were disappointed because God was doing a new thing, rather than reviving the old thing. Here we hear the echo of Jesus' voice, don't we? He said, "You can't put new wine in old wineskins."

Recently I found this old video footage of the season in my life when our kids were tiny, and their voices were high-pitched. I was a younger man then, in my 30s, with four little ones running through my house. One day, it was raining outside, and I decided to play a game with them—who can throw the Ketchup bottle into the trash can.

You would think watching that clip would make me smile. Instead, my first thought was, "I'm sad this is over." I will never carry those little kids to bed again. I will never hear those high-pitched voices in my house again. To feel sadness about the past is normal. Sadness is honoring loss. Lynley and I don't have those kids anymore.

But what does God call us to do? He calls us to keep building. He calls us to honor what was, but we refuse to be imprisoned by it.

One of the most challenging verses in the Bible has to be Ecclesiastes 7:10:

**Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this. Eccl. 7:10**

Why is it "not wise" to ask this question? For a couple of reasons. First, because memory edits the footage. It highlights the peaks and quietly deletes the valleys. What we remember as "full" may not have been as full as we think. We're comparing today's reality to yesterday's highlight reel.

Second, we shouldn't say this because if you do, you become a person that mentally moves backward when the kingdom of God is moving forward.

***Nostalgia is a dangerous temptation to confuse love for part of life with love for all of life. It substitutes the delight of the present for the fantasies of the past. Nostalgia is not memory...It is a snapshot of the past, edited to suit us.***

***We remember the days on the old boat, but conveniently forget the trouble of cleaning and hauling and rowing the thing. We remember the beloved dog, but forget the barking and the jumping and the damage it did to the couch. Unless we***

***deal with both dimensions of every aspect in life, we begin to use memory to escape both the reality of the present, and the reality of the past as well.***

***It is a beguilingly dangerous temptation of old age, this return to an unreal past.  
–The Gift of Years, Joan Chittister***

The Apostle Paul said we forget what is behind and press on toward the goal in Christ Jesus. We give ourselves permission to grieve, but we resolve to keep building.

The question for us today is not: “Who remembers the good old days?” The question is: “Who is ready to build the next ones?” The question is not, “Who are the Bellevue babies?” The question is “Who are the Bellevue builders?”

There comes a moment when memory must bow to mission.

**A Seasoned Christian Asks:**

**What if the “new thing” God is doing feels thinner than what I experienced before?**

To answer this question, I want to appeal to the book of Zechariah, which takes place in the same era as Ezra. In that book, more people have returned from exile and started rebuilding the temple, but the momentum faded. Opposition came, discouragement settled in, and what once felt like revival now feels small and unfinished. They remember Solomon’s temple, and what’s in front of them doesn’t compare. Into that moment, God speaks:

**“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.” Zech: 4:6**

and then,

**“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin...” Zechariah 4:10**

God doesn’t deny that it’s small—He just tells them not to despise it, because they’re standing at the foundation, not the finished house. And that’s the reminder for us: what feels thin may just be early. God celebrates new things that He’s starting.

Now, if we’re honest, this tension shows up in every generation. Older voices today often say,

“They’re always on their phones... they don’t know how to be present.”

“They don’t get outside like we used to... everything is indoors and digital.”

“They don’t respect what came before them... they’re too quick to move on.”

“They want everything fast... they don’t understand patience or process.”

“They haven’t sacrificed like we did... they don’t know what things cost.”

Some of that may be true, and fair, but some of it is exactly what Zechariah is warning about: we’re comparing a finished past to a beginning present. And if we’re not careful, we’ll despise the very thing God is just beginning to build.

So instead of criticizing what’s missing, what if we started noticing what God has placed in them?

*They are more globally aware than any generation before them.*

They can see needs across the world in seconds—and many of them care deeply about injustice, poverty, and brokenness.

*They are more open about their struggles.*

Previous generations often hid pain. This generation is quicker to talk about anxiety, doubt, and questions—which, in the right environment, can lead to real healing and authentic faith.

*They are less impressed with shallow answers.*

They want something real. They’re not looking for polished religion—they’re looking for truth that holds up under pressure.

*They are highly connected.*

Yes, through devices—but that also means the gospel can travel faster than ever before. One voice, one testimony, one moment can reach thousands instantly.

*They are adaptable.*

They’ve grown up in constant change. And that means they’re uniquely wired to navigate a fast-moving world with the unchanging truth of the gospel.

Maybe, just maybe, the same God who moved in powerful ways before is preparing to use them to carry the gospel into places we could have never reached.

**A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:**

**How can you tell the difference between a true movement of God and hype?**

That's a thoughtful question, and it deserves more than a quick answer. Scripture actually gives us a kind of *discernment grid* so we don't confuse noise for movement. We can tell the difference between a true movement of God and hype by asking three questions when we see something that looks like revival, it looks like lots of people getting fired up about God. Ask these three:

1. Who gets the glory?

A true movement lifts up Jesus, not personalities. John 16:14 says the Spirit glorifies Christ. If the spotlight stays on a person or platform, be careful. But when Jesus is clearly at the center, that's a sign God is at work.

2. What kind of fruit does it produce?

Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, "You will recognize them by their fruits." Hype creates moments. God creates transformation. Look for lasting changes like repentance, obedience, and endurance, not just excitement in the room.

3. Does it align with God's Word?

In Acts 17:11, the Bereans tested everything against Scripture. A real movement drives people deeper into the Bible, not away from it. If it requires bending truth to sustain it, it's not from God.

**A Student Asks:**

**Can God really use someone who doesn't have their life figured out yet?**

It's normal for young people to count themselves out from true kingdom work, because after all, they are still in the process of becoming "who they will one day be" but the problem with that mentality is that this is true of all human beings no matter the age.

God uses us in each stage of life, even though we are less mature than we will be in the days that follow. In other words, God uses imperfect people. Look at Peter—impulsive, inconsistent, even denied Jesus at His lowest moment. And still, Jesus chose him to help lead the early church. Or David, anointed as a teenager, long before his life was fully formed.

**God's pattern is not to find flawless people, but to form people as they follow Him.**

Even as a young person, you can begin to yield your life to God. Focus on obedience—on learning to hear God's voice and immediately apply what you hear. Every

Sunday, write down something from the sermon that speaks to you, and then leave the room and find a way to make it actionable. This goes for every encounter you have with the Lord—just try to line up your life with the life of Jesus. This is called spiritual formation, and if you do this over and over again, for an extended time, you become the kind of person that God loves to use.

Every teenager should memorize 2 Chron. 16:9,

**For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully His. 2 Chron 16:9**

Believe that in your heart, and obedience becomes a primary motivation—if you want to live the kind of life that God takes, and God builds something great out of, even if it starts out small.