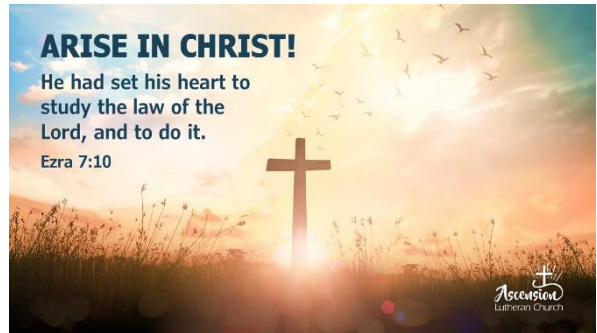


ARISE IN CHRIST – RETURN YOUR LIFE TO THE LORD

Ever get tired of always trying to get your life in order?

- Never quite arriving?
- Just when you finally have that one thing together, another thing falls apart?
- First, the bad thing knocks the stuffing out of you, and then all the effort of trying to fix it just overwhelms you all over again.



It's hard enough to get your own life back in order. It can be even more challenging when you feel responsible for someone else.

I've been seeing a lot of things on Mother's Day this year about how, more than ever, this year so many moms just want some recovery time.

- The pandemic has been 14 months of abnormal stress, a relentless need and pressure to guide and rescue others in your care from one challenge and crisis to another.
- I saw a video clip of a mom trying to be funny about Mother's Day. She said, *"I just want some alone time where I do more than just hide in a room and cry."* Humor often expresses very real pain.
- Moms, your work is not in vain. Parenting is a high and holy calling often done in low and humble settings. It is God's work, the ministry of daily life, and the Lord is with you in it.

In these recent weeks in worship we've been learning faith lessons from that part of the Old Testament story called the Exile and Return.

Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were exiled into captivity in Babylon.

The Biblical Exile was also a time of despair for the people in their relationship to God.

- Where is God in my suffering? Does God care? Has God abandoned me and my people?
- Know this: God is with you in your suffering. God does care. God has not abandoned you or any of us.

All manner of hardships can send a person into a place of emotional exile.

- Exile is when the disruptive or bad thing happens and sends your life off into a tailspin where it suddenly feels like you're living in a whole different world. Daily living in Babylon is a spiritual wasteland.
- Return is the journey to get your life back. The road to recovery can be long.

The Return from Exile in the Bible happened in three stages:

- In the first return, it was a guy with one of those great Bible names that's just fun to say, Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel led the return to worship and started the rebuilding of the temple.

- In the second return, Ezra reminded the people that it's not enough just to worship and then still live anyway you want to. Fully returning to the Lord means returning to the wisdom and ways of the Lord, including faithfulness in your personal-life morals and your public-life ethics.
- In the third return, Nehemiah led the people in rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem, restoring the city's identity, boundaries, and protection.

The 3 phases of the biblical return can give tips for the spiritual life recovery your life needs:

- Do you need to recover your worship life?
- Beyond worship alone, do you need to recover your faithfulness and obedience to the Lord in how you actually live your life?
- Do you need to recover even your own Christian identity?

You know, don't you, that the Lord wants more from you than just your attendance at an occasional worship service, right?

The Bible tells how the complete return to the Lord was not easy. It took not only ongoing effort but a certain amount of conflict and fight.

- The temple rebuilding ran into pagan cultural resistance which succeeded in halting the recovery for a while.
- Ezra 4 says, *"The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build... At that time, the work on the house of God in Jerusalem... was discontinued"*
- What kind of resistance from the secular world are you running into in your own effort to be faithful in your worship and in your life?

The people of Jerusalem did succeed in defeating the external enemies, but they soon learned the more challenging opposition was themselves, their own temptations to live their own way instead of God's way.

- The harder battle is always the one with your own self.

It was Ezra who led the moral and ethical reform that a full return from exile required.

In Ezra 7 we learn many things about Ezra:

- He had a special relationship with God. *"The hand of the Lord his God was upon him."*
- Both his heart and his life belonged to the Lord, *"Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it."*
- Ezra knew his calling was to look after more than himself alone, he knew it was, *"to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel."* He had a responsibility to serve others by teaching them also to live according to God's will... which, by the way, sure sounds a lot like parenting.

Is there a road of recovery the Lord is calling you to take in order for you to return to him and to the abundant life God really wants for you?

Follow the call of grace and faithfulness, for it will lead you home. Amen.