

Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah

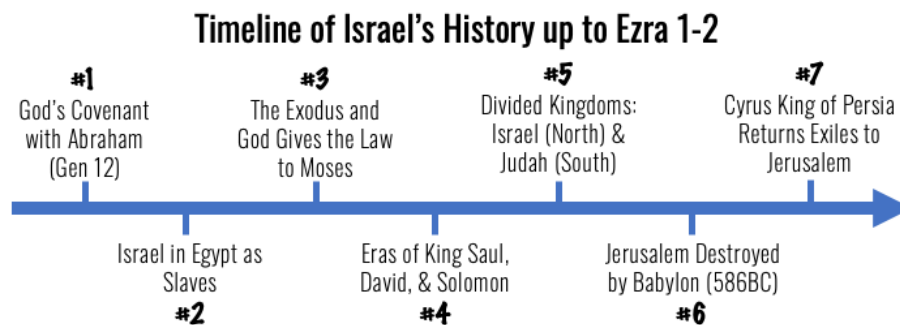
Part 1: Returning from Exile | Ezra 1-2

Rev. Andrew Jun

[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

Introduction

Today, we are starting a new sermon series through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah called “Rebuild.” These two books in the Bible often go together and record the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the temple.



Let me give us some background by explaining the sweep of Israel’s history from the Old Testament here: YHWH, the personal name of the one true God of the Scriptures, made a covenant with Abraham. Abraham’s family grew to become the nation of Israel while slaves in Egypt. God raised up Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land and gave them the Law (their Scriptures). After they initially conquered and settled into the Promised Land, they eventually set up a kingdom- first ruled by Saul, then David, and finally Solomon.

After Solomon’s death, the kingdom of Israel was split into two: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms abandoned their covenant with YHWH and became more and more wicked. Then in 586BC, Judah was conquered by the Babylonian empire; the capital city, Jerusalem, and the temple in it were destroyed and the elites of Jerusalem were taken into exile in Babylon.

All this history is important because this wasn’t the end of the story! God’s story of salvation continued in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah! Now seventy years after their exile, God orchestrated the return of his people back to Jerusalem. The book of Ezra describes the rebuilding of the temple and the book of Nehemiah describes the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem. But more importantly, both books reveal how God is ever faithful to his covenant with his people and faithful to his plan of salvation for the world. We will see that more than just rebuilding the temple and the city walls, YHWH rebuilds his people to be *his covenant people*!

And this wasn’t the end of the story either! God’s story of salvation continued with Jesus Christ as the centerpiece and fulfillment of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this sermon series, we will learn about the unchanging character of God and how he works in the world, as well as what it means to be his covenant people in Christ.

In light of Jesus Christ, we can also *rebuild* as a church with the hope of certain change and growth. This is especially the case for us in the pandemic world that we are in right now. It has undoubtedly been a historic, global event that has changed how we live and function as a church. But in this season- as we learn from Ezra and Nehemiah- we have the opportunity to *rebuild* our identities and lives in Christ in ways that will be for our good and for his glory! So let’s be ready to *rebuild*, amen? Today we start with this sermon from Ezra 1-2, titled “Returning from Exile.”

Proposition

Paul's main point can be summarized in this way- this is the "one thing" that we can take to heart from 2 Corinthians 11:1-15:

***Hope in the Lord, Sovereign over
history and Deliverer of his people!***

Organizational Statement

We'll see how YHWH reveals himself in four ways to us in this Scripture- which will be the four parts of this sermon: first, the Lord is Sovereign; second, the Lord is Covenant-Keeper; third, the Lord is Provider; and fourth, the Lord is Deliverer. In each part, we'll also talk about how Christ is the fulfillment of these identities of God.

Scripture Reading

This text of Scripture is very long, so what I will do is read some selected verses from Ezra 1-2 as we work through it in the sermon.

Transition: Ok, first let's...

Sermon Outline

I. Focus on Ezra 1:1: The Lord is the Sovereign!

- A. ***[Here's the first truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture...]* Truth #1: The Lord Jesus is the Sovereign, directly in control of everything in the world.**
1. In this part of the book of Ezra, we see that YHWH was directly involved in the world and directly used the King of Persia to accomplish his will.
 - a) Let's go ahead and read Ezra 1:1 first:
 - o Ezra 1:1 (ESV): *1 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 up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing...*
 - b) There's so much already in this first verse of Ezra 1! The author of Ezra wrote that the *Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia* to make this proclamation after he defeated the Babylonian empire. The proclamation was to allow the exiles of Judah (the southern kingdom) to return to their homeland. It is significant that the Lord was directly involved in making this happen! Whenever you see the word "LORD" in the Old Testament, it's actually "Y-H-W-H" (which we pronounce as "Yahweh")- it's the proper name of God that Israel used. But YHWH is not just a god among many gods- worshiped by this one particular people group- but *the one true God: the one who created the universe and the one who is the Sovereign.*
 - c) The reason I'm mentioning all these historical details is because God is the Sovereign of history! The words "the Sovereign" mean that he is *the* supreme ruler of the universe- the one who has ultimate power and control of everything. This includes all the "big things" that happen in history. Just think about this: two centuries before Cyrus, YHWH told Judah through the prophet Isaiah that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed due to their sins. But- get this- God's chosen servant named "Cyrus" would

rebuild the city and the temple (Isaiah 44:24-28)! The great civilizations in the Bible- Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome- are all established by YHWH. Proverbs 21:1 says that the Lord turns the hearts of kings however he wants like a stream of water!

- d) But the Scriptures also reveal that YHWH is the Sovereign of all the “little things” as well- he intervenes in the little things, like *stirring up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia* to make this decision and to make this proclamation, sending the exiles of Judah back home. In fact, this was already in the plans of YHWH eternally before, as the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed a couple times. Here is one of his prophecies:
- o Jeremiah 29:10-14 (ESV): *10 “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*
- e) Do you see these wonderful words? We’ll talk about the *personal, gracious* nature of God in a moment, but what we see here was that this seventy-year exile in Babylon was all part of YHWH’s plans for his people; he would use Babylon to discipline the people of Israel; and he would use this other pagan king- from Persia this time- to bring them back to Jerusalem and Judah!

2. ***[Here’s the first truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture again...] Truth #1: The Lord Jesus is the Sovereign, directly in control of everything in the world.***

- a) Context: God of the Old Testament is the same as God of the New Testament, now fully revealed in Jesus Christ! This week in my Bible reading with my wife and son, we read about this in...
- o Colossians 1:15-17 (NLT): *15 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, 16 for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see— such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. 17 He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.*

Jesus Christ is the Sovereign, directly in control of everything in the world! He existed before Creation; is the Creator of the universe; and is the Sovereign over the universe! He is the one who establishes all the rulers and authorities of the human world and the spiritual world. He is the one who holds it all together!

- b) Context: Think about some of the things that have happened in a very, very small slice of human history- the last 50 years (so from 1971-2021, which is just a little more than my lifetime): the end of the Soviet Union and the Communist block (after being a world-changing movement in the 20th century); the Cold War and the very real threat of nuclear war; the start of the internet and everything that has changed with that; the September 11 attacks in the US and the decades-long war on terror that followed; the political and economic rise of Asia (especially Japan, China, India, and even now Indonesia); the inventions of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and all other social media; the continual conflicts in the Middle East and milestones like the Arab Spring movement...and now the global COVID-19 pandemic! As the world keeps turning and history keeps moving and changing, the constant is that Jesus Christ is the Sovereign, directly in control of everything in the world! The hope we have is that the one, true God of the universe is also gracious and personal, as we’ll see in the next part...

Transition: So first, we saw that the Lord is the Sovereign. Second, let's...

II. Focus on Ezra 1:2-4: The Lord is the Covenant-Keeper!

A. *[Here's the second truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture...]* Truth #2: The Lord Jesus is the Covenant-Keeper, faithful to his promise to take his people home.

1. In this part of the book of Ezra, we see that YHWH kept his promise that his people would return to the Promised Land.

a) I'm going to be focusing on Ezra 1:2-4 now...

- o Ezra 1:2-4 (ESV): 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. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 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."

It's just amazing that Cyrus acknowledged that YHWH was the "God of heaven" and the one who was responsible for making him the king of this mighty empire. He stated that YHWH was the one who called him to rebuild the temple.

- b) This is where we need to think about the significance of the temple in Jerusalem. This was where the people of Israel were supposed to make pilgrimages every year; they would worship, pray, and offer their sacrifices in the temple. It represented the presence of the Lord among his people. The ark of the covenant- where the original stones of the Ten Commandments were stored- was in the temple. So, if you think about it, the temple encompassed a lot of what their covenant relationship with YHWH was supposed to be.
- c) The tragedy is that the history of Israel can be described simply and sadly as a history of constantly forsaking their covenant with the Lord. Generation after generation...they constantly dropped the ball! But incredibly, YHWH is still faithful to his covenant with Israel! He made a promise to his people and would do everything to keep his promise, no matter what his people did. Remember the words of Jeremiah the prophet? YHWH said that he knew his plans for them- to give them a future and a hope! After those seventy years, he'd change their hearts (again!) and they would call upon him again and seek him with all their hearts- *this is the covenant that YHWH keeps because he's the Covenant-Keeper!*

2. *[Here's the second truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture again...]* Truth #2: The Lord Jesus is the Covenant-Keeper, faithful to his promise to take his people home.

- a) God as revealed here in the Old Testament as the Covenant-Keeper is the same God revealed in the New Testament! Let's think about the temple again. In Hebrews 9:24-28, the author wrote about how in the Old Testament times, the high priest could enter the most holy place in the temple (which represented the presence of God) only once per year to offer the sacrifice of atonement on behalf of the people. Today, now we have Jesus Christ, who is the mediator of a "new" covenant.
- b) According to this Scripture, Jesus did not just go to the altar in a representation of the presence of God (the temple) but he went to the altar in the real-life theater of the presence of God and offered his life there. *His blood was shed as the one-for-all-time sacrifice for the sins of the world. And as it says specifically...*

- o Hebrews 9:28 (NLT): *Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him.*

The sacrifice of Jesus' blood to redeem us is more than enough to take away our sins when we believe in him- he is the Covenant-Keeper. And notice that this Scripture says that Jesus will come again to finalize the salvation to us who are waiting faithfully for him- he is the Covenant-Keeper!

- c) Context: The storyline- or history- of God's plans for this world has a definitive end. The hopeful promise that we have is that Jesus will take his people home to our eternal "Promised Land." Think about this for a moment everyone! There is a glorious home that Jesus is preparing for us in heaven that far outweighs anything that seems glorious on earth! C.S. Lewis wrote about this in his book, *The Weight of Glory*, that everlasting life is the consummation of a Christian's earthly discipleship- it's what we long for because we long being with our beloved King and Savior in perfect communion, for eternity!
- d) Context: Jesus Christ is the Covenant-Keeper and will take us home! Therefore, we can have proper perspective regarding our lives on earth. Brothers and sisters, we can know that possessions and success in our earthly lives are not worth clinging onto so tightly in light of eternity. We can endure through our sufferings- no matter how bad they are- because we know they are temporary in light of eternity. We can know that our earthly lives go by fast and are but a speck of dust in the cosmos in light of eternity, so we'll invest our lives wisely into things that really matter to God. There's an old Christian folk song with these words that I want us to remember: "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through!"

Transition: First, we saw that the Lord is the Sovereign; second, we saw that the Lord is the Covenant-Keeper. Third, let's...

III. Focus on Ezra 1:5-8: The Lord is the Provider!

A. [Here's the third truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture...] Truth #3: The Lord Jesus is the Provider, taking care of his people all along our journey.

1. In this part of the book of Ezra, we see that YHWH resourced his people's return through King Cyrus and the Persians.
 - a) We'll go ahead and read this part of the text from...
 - o Ezra 1:5-8 (ESV): *5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. 6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. 7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.*
 - b) YHWH actually provided everything- including the internal change of heart inside his people! In verse 5 the Scripture says that YHWH *stirred* up the heads of the different families to lead them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. In other words, he raised up the covenant people to *be* the covenant people of the Lord! God graciously included these specific people- and there were probably some others who chose *not* to go back home- in the covenant and these heads of the families had the privilege to be a part of this historic rebuild!

- c) Not only that, but God even provided their neighbors- the Persians, Babylonians, and other people groups living among them- to resource them with what they would need to accomplish this rebuild: silver, gold, goods, and even livestock. Additionally, in verses 9-11, Cyrus made sure that all the items from the temple that had been previously looted by the Babylonians and stored in their treasuries decades before would now be given back to the people of God and returned back into the temple when it was rebuilt- down to all the gold basins, bowls, and other vessels made of gold and silver!
 - d) This whole situation describes a “second exodus” for Israel. The first exodus was when they were delivered out of slavery from Egypt. Now in this second exodus, YHWH delivered his people again- this time from exile in Babylon. YHWH led the king of Persia to let the people of Israel go back to their homeland. YHWH is the Sovereign over kings and history and this was all part of his plan; YHWH is the Covenant-Keeper as well, who started and kept up his covenant relationship and promised to bring them home; and now we see YHWH is the Provider who would take care of all their needs for their journey and for the rebuilding of the city and temple. He would not abandon them to fend for themselves on their journey back to Jerusalem or in the rebuilding process of the city walls and the temple. He provided for them and would continue to do so every step of the way!
2. ***[Here’s the third truth about Jesus the fulfillment of this Scripture again...] Truth #3: The Lord Jesus is the Provider, taking care of his people all along our journey.***
- a) **Context:** On their first exodus, how many ways did YHWH take care of Israel? And yet, they were so cynical at those moments when they needed to trust that he’d provide water and food, that he’d defend them from their enemies, or that he’d lead them in conquering the Promised Land. They were so discontent in their hearts and so quickly made their own idols and complained against the Lord! Cynicism and discontent plague our hearts too as we go along this journey of following Jesus to our heavenly home.
 - b) **Context:** These are both very hard to see in our hearts, but I’ll try. Cynicism can look like unwillingness to pray and talk to God about our situations and what we might need. It can also look like procrastinating on things you know God wants you to follow through on: you keep putting off that get-out-of-debt plan (thinking “I can never get out of this debt”) or that request to meet up to resolve a conflict with someone (thinking “that person will hurt me again”). Discontent can look like constantly thinking that others have it better than you or restlessly chasing after various things to occupy your affections and attention. You might not be able to listen to the Lord or talk to him because you are frustrated with the path that he’s taken you on so far.
 - c) **Context:** But the bar for the Father’s care for us is set at the giving of the Lord Jesus, as the apostle Paul wrote in...
 - o Romans 8:32 (ESV): *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.*

If the Father provided the life of his Son for us, we can trust that he will give everything else we need in this life! In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that we need not be anxious about what we will eat, drink, or wear. Our heavenly Father knows best what we need- even better than ourselves! The best step we can take is to see our cynicism and discontent and confess it to the Lord- this is a really solid step towards living with greater hope.

Transition: First, we saw that the Lord is the Sovereign; second, we saw that the Lord is the Covenant-Keeper; third we saw that the Lord is the Provider. Now fourth and finally, let's...

IV. Focus on Ezra 2:1: The Lord is the Deliverer!

A. [Here's the fourth and final truth about how Jesus fulfills this Scripture...] Truth #4: The Lord Jesus is the Deliverer, saving them personally to be free to live for him.

1. In this part of the book of Ezra, we see that YHWH followed through on his promise: they were freed and returned to Jerusalem.

- a) We won't read all seventy verses here- just this first one:

- o Ezra 2:1 (ESV): *1 Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.*

Then from verses 2-58, it lists the leaders of the people of Israel who returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylonia; the thirty-three families of the tribe of Judah; the four families of priests; the families of Levites, singers, and gatekeepers; the thirty-six families of temple servants; and finally, the families of Solomon's servants (who were probably the servants of the kings of Judah). It's important for us to realize that it all *actually* happened- what the Lord said he'd do actually became reality!

- b) Verses 59-63 are important because it talks about various people who could not prove their family line in the covenant community or as priests specifically. They were not totally excluded, but they were not included until a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummin about the matter. Using "Urim" and "Thummin" was something like casting lots that the Old Testament prescribed in discerning the will of the Lord. The important thing to note is that there is a distinction between people *inside* the community of YHWH's covenant and between *outside* of that community. It is a community that wasn't necessarily exclusive- actually people from the other surrounding people groups were allowed to join the covenant community if they trusted in YHWH (for example Ruth was a prominent figure in the Old Testament and she was from the people of Moab). And later in Nehemiah (3:4), one of those families that was excluded at first was now included in the rebuilding of the walls- YHWH must have confirmed them as part of the covenant community sometime along the way!

- c) Verse 64 says that 42,360 total people from the families of Judah returned. But this was not just a nameless, faceless mass- these were *individuals* who were specifically part of YHWH's covenant community by his grace! They *personally* experienced the Lord as the Sovereign, the Covenant-Keeper, the Provider, and finally at the end of this part, the Deliverer- the one who brought 42,360 souls- families, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and servants- through the 1,500km journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem, their homeland. They were vouched for by the records as truly people who belonged in the covenant community and had the privilege of partaking in the rebuilding of their lives and relationship with the Lord. Even some of those who were not at first, whose names were *added* to the records, were eventually included into the covenant community!

- d) I want to read this psalm that described what it felt like for these people who returned to Jerusalem...

- o Psalm 126 (NLT):

1 When the Lord brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!

2 We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy.

And the other nations said, "What amazing things the Lord has done for them."

3 Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us! What joy!

- 4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, as streams renew the desert.
 5 Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.
 6 They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.

2. **[Here's the fourth and final truth about how Jesus fulfills this Scripture again...] Truth #4: The Lord Jesus is the Deliverer, saving us personally to be free to live for him.**

- a) **Context:** The Lord Jesus is our Deliverer- he is the one who enabled us to be a part of his covenant community by his grace! To get what I mean, let's look at Romans 8 again...
- o Romans 8:34-35, 38-39 (ESV): *34 Christ Jesus is the one who died— more than that, who was raised— who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Jesus Christ died and his sacrifice as the perfect Lamb of God justifies us before God (which means God sees us now as righteous and without sin). Jesus resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father, and according to this Scripture, he *intercedes* for us. This means that he stands on our behalf that we truly do belong in as part of God's family, beloved by him!. Nothing can take us away from that status before God as justified; nothing can separate us from the love of God in the Lord Jesus the Deliverer!

- b) **Context:** Can I dare say that this should give us GREAT confidence and assurance in how we live our lives on earth? Not even cataclysmic historical events need shake us- and definitely not a global pandemic! Of course, it will definitely be painful and difficult; we definitely have to make adjustments and navigate through seasons of uncertainty. The Lord Jesus is *our* Deliverer and nothing in this universe can separate us from the love of God that is in him! He has fought for you on the cross, he has fought for you in your life, and he will continue to fight for you in your life until that final day!
- c) **Context:** So let's live with this hope, church! In light of the Lord Jesus as the Sovereign, the Covenant-Keeper, the Provider, and the Deliverer- our tears are not in vain! In fact, seeds of hope are those *tears* planted as we endure times of pain, difficulty, uncertainty, and risk! Those seeds of hope are our *prayers* lifted up for our family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, communities, and city! Those seeds of hope are our *deeds done in obedience to the Lord* in righteousness and desire to honor the Lord! Those seeds of hope are our *service to others* in loving, forgiving, encouraging, speaking truth, and caring for others! We can hope, as God's people on our own journeys, that we will see this harvest if we do not give up! Let us ***hope in the Lord, Sovereign over history and Deliverer of his people!***

Transition: First, we saw that the Lord is the Sovereign; second, we saw that the Lord is the Covenant-Keeper; third we saw that the Lord is the Provider; fourth, we saw that the Lord is the Deliverer! Now I'll conclude my sermon with the...

Conclusion

V. Life Application

- A. What are the “next steps” that we can take in light of the “one thing” to *hope in the Lord, Sovereign over history and Deliverer of his people?***
1. First, in what specific ways have cynicism and discontent distorted your view of the Lord?
 - a) Think about the ways you have become cynical towards God and in his provision in your life. Is it in your lack of prayer? Is it in putting off or avoiding things you know God wants you to follow through on? Or think about the ways you express discontent towards God and in his provision in your life. Is it in constantly thinking others have it better than you? Is it in that restlessness in your heart that always chases after other things to occupy your affections and attention? I want to call us to repenting of these things as the Holy Spirit convicts us!
 2. Second, what “seeds of hope” must you keep planting in your life (in yourself, church, or world)?
 - a) I want us to think about something that we consider as impossible to happen: a change of heart within your loved ones, your mental health condition, a relationship that needs to change, a ministry to be started in among a people in great need- whatever the Lord puts on your heart. What will it mean to plant “seeds of hope” in those impossible situations or people? Can you do it by faith that the Lord Jesus is the Sovereign, the Covenant-Keeper, the Provider, and the Deliverer? Make it our prayer: “Open the eyes of my hearts to see that this impossible thing is totally doable for you!”

Transition: Amen! I want to give you a few minutes to meditate on God’s Word and listen to God’s Spirit, asking ourselves these two questions. Let’s pray...

© 2021 Harvest Mission Community Church

This manuscript has been lightly edited and formatted. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any error to be with the transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker.