



MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME | A TIME TO RE-CENTER

May 24, 2020

I would like to begin today by recounting the story of a 2010 film starring Denzel Washington entitled *The Book of Eli*. I should tell you in advance that it is a somewhat dark and violent movie. It has a kind of Old Testament feel to it. So if you decide to see it, you can't say I didn't warn you! But while this movie is a bit disturbing, it is also deeply thought provoking.

The film takes place some thirty years in the future following a nuclear apocalypse. Denzel Washington plays the character of Eli, who is traveling west by foot across the wasteland of what had once been the United States. Over the course of his travels, Eli enters a dilapidated western town that is run by a warlord named Carnegie, masterfully played by Gary Oldman.

The only people who know how to read are people like Carnegie who were old enough to have lived before the last great war. Carnegie—appropriately named—regularly sends out his illiterate thugs to find a certain book—because he believes that this book is the key to keep people in the town under his control. He grew up with this book. He knows its **power**—but he doesn't remember the words. During Eli's stop in the town, Carnegie discovers that Eli is an educated person who could help him in his quest, but Eli has no interest in getting involved.

Carnegie sends a woman named Solara to try to change Eli's mind. During the course of their conversation, Solara discovers that Eli has a book and excitedly asks him about it. But he quickly bundles it up and refuses to discuss it. He does, however, share his meal with Solara and teaches her to say a prayer of thanks before they eat. Moved by this act, Solara attempts to teach her mother to pray before they have breakfast together the next morning, but she forgets how it ends. Carnegie overhears and supplies the missing word: "Amen." The word she was looking for was: "Amen." But with that he suspects that Eli possesses the book that he is so desperately trying to find—the *Bible*. Apparently, every last Bible had been burned after the war—all except for one. Carnegie pressures Solara into telling him what she saw. She confirms his suspicions by making the **sign** of the cross which she glimpsed on the book's cover.

Carnegie demands that Eli give him the Bible. He tells him it's not right to keep that book hidden away. It's meant to be shared with others. Eli agrees. That's what he wants with all his heart and soul. Eli has been following a voice that is leading him west and he has always believed that he would find a place where the book belonged and where people needed it. But he knows that *this* town is not the place that he has been seeking.

When Eli refuses to give up the book, Carnegie orders that he be killed and a shoot-out ensues. Eli manages to escape, but eventually Carnegie and his men catch up to him and take the Bible away from him at gunpoint. Deprived of his Bible, Eli nevertheless continues his journey west and eventually arrives in San Francisco and rows out to Alcatraz Island. There Eli is introduced to a man who is seeking to gather all the remnants of civilization before the war in order to rebuild society. Carnegie had stolen Eli's book (which as it turns out Carnegie was unable to read for reasons I will not explain—I don't want to give away the ending). But even though Carnegie had taken the book, Eli nevertheless tells the man at Alcatraz that he has a King James Bible. But how? Does he have a second copy that he has secretly stashed away? Yes and No. Eli tells the man on Alcatraz to get a whole lot of paper and then to pay very close attention—and to write down everything he says—exactly as he says it.

With that, Eli proceeds to recite the entire Bible—word for word—beginning with the first book of Moses, called Genesis. Eli had spent the last 30 years reading the Bible every day and committing it to memory and now he passes it along to a new generation. As the movie ends, we see a printing press pumping out new copies of the long-lost book and along with it—renewed hope for a rebuilt society.

Last week we began to consider how we might begin to rebuild our church and our city in the aftermath of this pandemic. During the early days of the lockdown, New York looked like a ghost town, but as restrictions show some promise of easing, and especially as the weather begins to turn, we are starting to see new signs of life.

Nevertheless, it may still take us some time to achieve a new normal. The questions that confront us today are: How do we rebuild our city? How do we rebuild our church? How do we rebuild our lives?

For answers, I'd like to return to the book of Ezra because it resonates so powerfully with our own experience right now. We've been living through a time of exile in which we feel cut off from our friends and family, our work, our art, and our church community. We have not been able to worship Jesus together like we used to, and it's not altogether clear how we will rebuild from here. And that's why we need this book because Ezra is all about the return from exile.

You could say that Ezra, like the *Book of Eli*, is a post-apocalyptic story. You may recall that following a long period of decline, the history of God's people in the promised land ended in tragedy. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 587 BC. They demolished the city and completely destroyed the Temple which was left in ruins. Moreover, they forcibly removed the citizens of Jerusalem from their homeland and carried them off to Babylon where most of them would spend the rest of their lives as exiles—cut off from everything they had once cherished.

But 50 years later everything changes. Cyrus the King of Persia defeats the Babylonians and gives the exiles permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple and their city. And then another 80 years go by, and now it is time for God to do something *new*—yet again.

That is where we pick up the story in our passage today taken from Ezra, chapter 7. It is now the year 458 BC, and there's a new king. Artaxerxes is the King of Persia and he continues the foreign policy of his predecessors, Cyrus and Darius. He encourages his subjugated people to return home to rebuild their holy cities and their sacred sites because it is in his own best interest. He figures this is the best way to keep the peace and to maintain control throughout his empire.

But Ezra chapter 7 shows us that it is not enough to merely rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. And so for us - as important as it may be for us to put this church back to good use and to participate in the renewal of New York City—something more is needed. And Ezra shows us the way. So let's take a moment to consider, the Heart of the Problem, the Necessary Solution, and the Inevitable Result.

So what was the heart of the problem? For 80 years, wave after wave of exiles in Babylon went home to Jerusalem to restore the city. Although it remained a shadow of what it had once been, they rebuilt the temple. The priests returned to work. They resumed their worship. They kept the Passover. But there was still something missing.

What was it? The prophet Malachi provides us with a hint. Malachi was an approximate contemporary of Ezra and the Book of Malachi reveals that the fundamental problem was that the people had forgotten **God**.

They might have returned home, but they had not returned to God as their first love and their highest good. Through Malachi, God appeals to his people: “Return to me and I will return to you.” Somehow, even though they had resumed their worship, they had not regained their love for God. As a result, all their religious activity was in danger of becoming nothing more than an empty show rather than an expression of a dynamic relationship.

And how had they lost God? Malachi suggests that the priests failed to teach the law—the Book of Moses—which was a way of referring to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For them, this was, of course, the very heart and center of their Scriptures. They were trying to rebuild their society, but they had effectively lost the Bible. The priests remembered enough of what had perhaps been handed down to them to get things up and running again—but they had forgotten some of the words. They had bits and pieces, but they didn’t know how they were all supposed to fit together.

If that was the problem, then what was the necessary solution? They needed an Eli—someone who could reintroduce them to the book. But they got something even better. They got an Ezra. We are introduced to Ezra for the first time in Ezra, chapter 7, which tells us that Ezra was a priest who could trace his lineage all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses and the very first high priest. But he wasn’t just a priest, he was a scribe, “skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord had given.” That little phrase points us to the antiquity of the Scriptures—they were from the time of Moses—and the authority of the Scriptures—they were given by the Lord. And Ezra, unlike everyone else of his day, was skilled in them. Many considered him to be second only to Moses himself. He quickly grasped the meaning of the Scriptures and he knew how to communicate their sense so that others could understand them. In other words, Ezra was the best of all preachers.

How did Ezra acquire these remarkable gifts? The first answer to that question is the grace of God. Everything is of grace. We’re told repeatedly throughout this book that “the hand of the Lord his God” was upon Ezra. That’s why the King of Persia granted Ezra whatever he wished. That’s why he was able to return to Jerusalem. That’s why he had such a remarkable impact on others. Ezra lived his life under the gracious hand of God.

But that didn’t make Ezra a puppet on a string. No, he had a role to play in faithfully pursuing the call that God had placed upon his life. Verse 10 reveals the secret to his success. Ezra “set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach it.” Notice the three things that Ezra was committed to doing and in the right order—to study, to do, and to teach.

Ezra set his heart on studying God’s word. He committed his life to it. As a priest, Ezra would have begun studying the Scriptures from an early age. He dedicated time to reading it, pondering it, discussing it and likely memorizing large sections of it. But he didn’t read it in a merely academic way. He was committed not only to studying the Scriptures, but doing them—living them out.

Before his death, Moses told the people that they must take to heart all the words of God and to be careful to follow them because these words are the key to life. God, as the one who created us and loves us, knows how life works best. Therefore, the Scriptures are not mere empty words, but rather our very life is found in them.

Ezra discovered that God has given us his Word not in order to keep us under his thumb — but to reveal to us the path to life. The more time he spent immersed in God’s Word, the more he was careful to do it — to put it into practice. Above all, the Scriptures would have impressed upon Ezra the call to love God with all his heart, mind, and soul and to love others as himself. It’s actually quite simple really: Love God and love people. Easy to say, but hard to do.

But that is why Ezra was committed to teaching the Scriptures to others. This book is not meant to be kept hidden away. It is meant to be shared with others. But you can't share what you don't have. Your words will hold no power if you haven't experienced them for yourself. It doesn't do any good to learn something with your mind and share it with your mouth if you haven't first experienced it in your heart. But Ezra got it right—*study* it—*do* it—*teach* it—and in that order. *Learn* it—*Live* it—*Share* it.

I don't know about you, but this prolonged lockdown has caused me to be more self-reflective. I have now been a minister for just shy of 15 years. Throughout that time, not much has changed. I've learned a lot about myself, of course, but I'm still the same person with the same values, the same commitments, the same goals. And yet recently I've sensed that perhaps something has slipped along the way. Now it could just be my stage of life—and sure that might have something to do with it. But I don't think that is the whole answer.

The passage that has recently come to my mind is Revelation, chapter 2, where the risen and reigning Jesus speaks a word to the church in Ephesus. He commends them for their hard work and perseverance. They have endured hardships and have not grown weary. The only problem is that they have forgotten the *love* they had at first.

Now I don't want to sound overly dramatic because things aren't that bad. In fact, in some ways, I'm in a better place than I've ever been. But the thought has crossed my mind: Have I become so **busy** with activity that I've lost sight of the love I had for God at the first? Have I spent so much time studying the Scriptures, wrestling with the arguments, and figuring out how to communicate what they mean to others that I haven't taken enough time to experience them and live them for myself? Have I focused on the mind and the mouth, but neglected the heart?

It might be different for you. Your faith might be all heart and no head in which case you might want to read a good book for once. Or you might be all mind and no mouth in which case you've got to share your faith with someone else. One commentator made the point that theology is like plutonium. If all you do is ingest it, it will make you sick. But if you wire it into your life, it will be explosive in its impact.

This global pandemic is causing all of us to take stock of our lives. It very well may be that up until this crisis hit, your life was going relatively well. But perhaps you are starting to realize that you have neglected the things that matter the most. Maybe you were distracted or you got lazy or bad habits settled in. And only now are you realizing your impoverishment. Perhaps you never took Jesus seriously, but now you are starting to wonder if you missed something. Or perhaps there was a time when you felt close to God and when you delighted yourself in him. You dedicated yourself to reading his word so that you might cultivate your love for him and live in response to his grace. But over the years, your love has grown dim.

I would like to suggest to you that now is the time to light that fire. Now is the time to stoke those embers that have perhaps begun to cool. Now is the time to re-center—to re-center our lives on God. As God said to the people in Ezra's day, so he says to us: Return to me, and I will return to you. One sure way to do that is to take up this book and read.

The thing that struck me about the movie *The Book of Eli* is that when you watch that film, it makes you realize what a precious thing the Bible is and yet we take it for granted. In a strange sort of way, the *Book of Eli* creates a longing within you to want to read it—and even to memorize it. Imagine if everything else were stripped away from you but you had memorized large portions of the Scriptures. No one can ever take that away from you. You always have it with you.

The heart of the problem in Ezra's day was that the people had in some ways forgotten their God. Ezra

provided the necessary solution by studying—living—and teaching God’s Word. But what was the inevitable result?

If we turn to the Book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, we read that all the people gathered in the square in Jerusalem and Ezra began not only to read the Scriptures, but to explain what they meant so that everyone understood what was being said. As a result, the people returned to the Lord. They didn’t worship the Bible. They worshiped the God revealed in the Bible. They lifted up their hands in praise and they bowed their heads in worship to God.

Many people began to weep as the Scriptures were read to them because they realized how much they had been missing. I love what Ezra does next. He says this day is holy to the Lord because God’s people have returned to the Lord. But just because it is holy doesn’t mean it is *solemn*. He tells them not to mourn or weep, but to rejoice and celebrate because “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The primary reason why they celebrated was because they understood the words that were spoken to them.

We can relate to that. How many of us have picked up the Bible and thought: What kind of a book is this? Sometimes we can’t make heads or tails of it, but when God sheds his light on it—suddenly everything begins to fall into place and it just might *change your life*.

What I want you to see is that we are in an even better position than Ezra. Nobody knew the Hebrew Scriptures like Ezra, but even he didn’t know half the story. He saw the shadows, but we can see the reality. He had the promises, but we have their fulfillment. He knew that God’s word was the key to life, but he didn’t know why.

We do. Ezra could never have guessed what we know. He could never have guessed that the Word of God would become a Person—not simply to teach us a truth but to show us how to live it—with head and heart—with mouth and hand. And Ezra never could have guessed that the Word of Life would Die—but he did. Jesus died on a cross—in our place—out of love. But being the Word of Life, death could not hold him down. No, he broke through the other side of death in order to open up a new and living way to the Father. That’s why Jesus, the Word of God, said that he is the way, the truth and the life. He does not simply SHOW us the path to life, he IS the path to life. When we finally understand the story—when we see who Jesus is and what he has done, then we realize that God must be our first love and our highest good because there is no lasting happiness apart from him. He is the path to life. That is why we must center our life on him.

I would like to close by telling you about a man you’ve probably never heard of. But you should know him because he wrote the most popular book in the Western world—second only to the Bible. For over 1,000 years, his book stayed at the very top of the best-seller list. Isn’t that incredible? 1,000 years! He left an indelible mark on countless minds — including the likes of Dante and Chaucer. For centuries, it would have been unthinkable that a learned person would not have read and loved this book. But most of us don’t even know his name.

Well, let me tell you. His name was Boethius, and this is his story. Boethius was born into an illustrious family in Rome but orphaned at the tender age of 7. Fortuitously, he was adopted by an even wealthier and more distinguished man than his own father who instilled in him a love of theology, philosophy and literature. He was one of the very few people in the West at the time trained in Greek and he set out to translate the great works of Plato and Aristotle into Latin. Poet, musician, philosopher, theologian. Boethius was without question the most educated man of his day.

Not only that—he lived in a sumptuous villa with his wife who was known for her beauty and kindness along

with their two talented sons. He very well could have spent the rest of his days living a leisurely life as a scholar, but sensing an obligation to society he entered into politics.

He quickly became a close confidante of Theodoric the Great. He was a Roman senator by the age of 25 and he was named Theodoric's consul in 510AD — which means he was basically the prime minister and later he was appointed to the highest position in the empire second only to Theodoric himself. But he would later write, that his greatest achievement, the source of greatest pride, was to see both of his sons named joint consuls at an even earlier age than himself. On the day when his two sons rode into the senate house among a thronging crowd, Boethius was the one who gave the speech in the king's honor before all the admiring senators. Proudest moment of his life.

Boethius had it all. He was rich, smart, powerful, influential, beautiful wife, accomplished kids. You've got nothing on Boethius. Bertrand Russell once said: "He would have been remarkable in any age, in the age in which he lived, he is utterly amazing."

But seemingly out of nowhere Boethius' life took a dramatic turn for the worse. He was falsely accused of plotting against the king by his rivals who were understandably envious of all that he had attained. With scarcely enough time to say goodbye to his family, he was carted off to prison and tortured. Suddenly he found himself locked up in a tiny little cell, stripped of everything he loved. Within a year or two he would be dead.

But from that little cell, Boethius wrote his best-seller. While locked-up behind bars, Boethius imagines a conversation with a metaphorical woman he calls Lady Philosophy. Through the ensuing discussion, Boethius reveals that the greatest tragedy of his life was not that he had lost his wealth, his honor, his power, his position, or his family. No, he slowly comes to realize that his very success in life, everything that he had attained and everyone he had ever loved, had allowed him to *forget* that God is his **highest** good. He was reminded that true happiness cannot depend on anything that can be stripped away from you in an instant by one sudden turn of the wheel of fortune. No, true happiness can only be found in God who is ever constant. And so it was in that dark cell as he awaited his ignominious death that Boethius returned to God as his *first love* and his *highest good*.

Our situation is likely not nearly as dire as his, and yet as we emerge out of this time of exile, we too may feel like we have been stripped of the things we hold most dear. In many ways, we may have been stripped of friends and family, physical community, health and well-being, meaningful work, stable income, creative opportunities, and most of all a clear, foreseeable future. But as for Boethius, so for us: God often brings us low before he lifts us up. So if you have been brought low, then take comfort from the fact that the God who has revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus has a special place in his heart for those who are broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

If we are going to rebuild our city and our church, we have to start with ourselves. We have to re-center. We have to return to our first love and our highest good because there is no lasting happiness to be found outside of him. Jesus, the Word of God, is the true path to life. If we have him then we have everything we need.

Would you please join me as we conclude in prayer?

Father God we pray that you would help us to return to you knowing that you have promised that you will always return to us. Help us to center our lives on Jesus who is the only true path to life. Help us to return to you as our first love and our highest good. We ask in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

Ezra 7:1-10

¹ Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah...son of Aaron the chief priest— ⁶ this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

⁷ And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. ⁸ And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. ¹⁰ 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.