

Ezra 1

Good evening and thank you for joining us! Would you please turn in your Bibles to Ezra 1?

Significance of this book...

At this point in Hebrew history, Jewish morale is at an all time low. The northern kingdom of Israel has long been conquered by Assyria. The Southern Kingdom of Judah has been conquered by the Babylonians, and Jerusalem has been utterly decimated. The temple is destroyed, the wall around the city lies in a heap of rubble, and the vast majority of Jews live in the confines of babylon. There were a few poor folks the Babylonians left behind to till the land of Israel during the captivity.

Israel is reaping the consequences of God's righteous judgment.

But God's promises for the Hebrews are about to come alive in an incredible and miraculous way, and that's really what the book of Ezra is all about.

If you've ever been a part of a home renovation project, you know renovations are never easy. You run into all kinds of snags and setbacks. If you ever tackle a remodeling project here are four truths to keep in mind...

First, it'll take longer than you planned.

Second, it'll cost more than you estimated.

Third, it'll be messier than you anticipated.

Fourth, it'll require greater determination than you expected.

This was the experience of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple. The year was 536 BC. In a miraculous turn of circumstances the seemingly invincible Babylon fell to a coalition of Medes and Persians...

The walls of the city of Babylon were impenetrable. Yet in a shrewd maneuver, rather than go over the walls, the Persian general, Cyrus, went under them. He dammed up the Euphrates that flowed under the walls, and his troops entered Babylon through the dried-up riverbed. His move surprised the Babylonians and Babylon was quickly defeated.

Overnight, the world's mightiest kingdom crumbled, and a new empire was born. King Cyrus took the throne, and ushered in the Medo-Persian Empire. And the overnight rise of the Persians had a profound impact on the Jews.

We're gonna study chapters 1-2, we're calling this series RETURN, REPAIR, and REVIVAL

Let's pray

1 Now 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, saying,

We attribute history-shaping events to economical, or political, or or military factors. But the first verse in Ezra teaches that God

Himself is the one behind the scenes of world events. God orchestrates the rise and fall of nations.

One of the most famous bible verses actually deals with the events of verse 1. How many times have you quoted this verse, **Jeremiah 29:11, For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.**

This verse gets printed in more Christian greeting cards than any other. I know believers who've made this passage their "life verse." I bet many of you can quote this verse from memory. And that's wonderful!

But I doubt most folks know what the verse before it tells us.

Jeremiah 29: 10 reads, **"For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. 11, For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.**

The promise of "a future and a hope" was first made to the exiled Jews living in far-a-way Babylon. God declared He would bring them back to the land of their fathers – and He arranged the fall of one empire-babylon, and the rise of another-the persians, to fulfill His promise.

Who knows what strings God will pull to fulfill His specific promise to you and I!

Remember, the Babylonians deported the people they conquered back to Babylon. As a result, the city and its suburbs were filled with foreigners. But this wasn't how the Persians ruled.

The Persians figured their subjects would be happier living in their original home lands. Cyrus sent the displaced, conquered people home – including the Jews. To be clear, they are still not their own nation, they don't have independence. That won't happen until Israel is declared a nation in the year 1948.

Now verse 1 says that the Lord stirred up Cyrus' spirit? And we wonder how that happened? Well, we can't say for sure, but its quite possible, even likely, that it was through the prophet, Daniel

When Cyrus overthrew Babylon, Daniel would have been in his nineties. There he was, on the night the Medes and Persians conquered the city as Belshazzar, the Babylonian leader, threw a wild party, drinking from the vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

You remember the story-Suddenly a hand appeared, writing on the wall. Belshazzar was understandably stricken with fear. When his mother told him that there was a man in his kingdom in whom was "the spirit of the holy gods," (Daniel 5:11), Daniel was summoned...

Daniel 5:25 "And this is the inscription that was written:

MENE,[fn] MENE, TEKEL,[fn] UPHARSIN.[fn]

26 This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; 27 TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; 28 PERES:

Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”[fn] 29 Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.
30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.

Within hours, the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon and it is believed by many that it wasn't long before Daniel had the opportunity to tell the conquering general, Cyrus, that his name was written in the Word of God.

2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia:

All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. It's debated, but Cyrus sounds like a true believer. He calls Persia's dominion over the nations a gift from God. He also makes God's cause his own. He agrees to reconstruct God's Temple in Jerusalem

And here's what's shocking. More than 150 years before this, through the prophet Isaiah, this was prophesied.

Isaiah 44:8 Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd,
And he shall perform all My pleasure,
Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built,"
And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." '

Cyrus continues to issue his decree: 3-4

3 Who 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 build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. 4 And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.

So not only does Cyrus release the Jews and instructs them to go build the temple, he calls on those who don't want to go. He tells them 'hey you don't have to go, but you do have a responsibility to help those who do,'

This should sound familiar.

In 1 Samuel 30, as David fought against the Amalekites, two-thirds of the men who were with him grew faint. "We can't go on," they said. "We're just too tired."

"OK," David said. "You stay here, guard the camp and keep the supply lines going while the rest of us go into battle."

When David and the troops returned after their victory over the Amalekites, the men who had fought said to the guys who had stayed behind, "You're not getting any rewards or spoil."

"Not so," David said. "Those who stayed with the stuff shall be rewarded equally with those who went into battle." **1 Samuel**

30:24 For who will heed you in this matter? But as his part is who goes down to the battle, so shall his part be who stays by the supplies; they shall share alike."

I love this because it means that even though we might not be able to go to the foreign mission field or pastor a church personally, if we pray consistently and give generously, we're involved in the supply lines and as much a part of the victory as if we were on the front lines.

5 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. Notice, while God is working in the heart of Cyrus, He's also working in the hearts of the Jews. Remember, some of the exiles had been in Babylon 70 years... a lifetime.

On top of that, God, through the prophet Jeremiah had counseled them to get jobs, build homes, settle in – they'll be in Babylon for a while. Many Jews had become successful, they'd risen to positions of prominence. Daniel was a good example.

As a result, few Jews wanted to return. Jerusalem was nothing but rubble. Rebuilding would be hard. Why bother, when life was comfortable on the banks of the Euphrates?

This is why it took the Holy Spirit to move on their hearts – to stir up a desire to obey. God moved on them to convict and reveal His will.

Folks we need to pray for this in our nation, in our cities, and even in this very church. I've never heard a church say-boy we have too many volunteers

Verse 6 records how the Jews who didn't go obeyed the decree by bankrolling their brother who did

6 And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered. The Jewish exiles leave from babylon and return to Jerusalem as a Church, their goal is further the worship of God.

The simplicity of these last couple verses can mask the incredible difficulties this group of returning Jews faced.

The journey itself was long, dangerous, and expensive. They returned to a city in ruins with no homes, roads, or city institutions.

They didn't have all the material resources they needed.

They didn't all return to Jerusalem but spread out over the province of Judea.

They had many enemies.

Their land was actually the possession of another empire.

What courage!!

7-8

7 King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods; 8 and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. Cyrus empties Babylon's coffers, and returns to the Jews the treasures from Solomon's Temple that were plundered by the Babylonians 70

years earlier. And he returns each one. In fact, he provides a count – an itemized list. Here's the manifest

9 This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, 10 thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles. 11 All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem. And this whole story is a wonderful picture of what God does inside of a person as they experience salvation.

Hey, God has a big eraser. He's the dispenser of second chances, and the God of new beginnings. He forgives us. He wipes our slate clean. Despite the ruin we've caused, and our years in bondage – whenever we humble ourselves and repent of our sin, He's ready to help us start over.

But understand Christianity is the willingness to start over! Jesus doesn't tinker. Slight alterations and minor modifications are not His goal. His intentions are not to help us attain our current goals, or reinforce our present lifestyle. Jesus brings a new direction. He insists on a new lifestyle. When Jesus becomes Lord, His goal is to completely remodel.

The Jews were uprooted, and replanted – and that's God's plan for us. Jesus uproots our old way of life, and He replants us in a new mindset. Hey, to be a Christian means leaving Babylon behind, and moving to a holy land.

So the decree has been issued. The Jews are ready to return. Chapter 1 closes with a packing list of treasures. Chapter 2 is the passengers list. Chapter 2 is the passengers list. It records the Jews who returned to the land at Cyrus' urging

Chapter 2

1 Now^[fn] these are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city. Here begins the list of the families and individuals who made the return to Judah and Jerusalem now that it was a province of the Persian Empire.

2 Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar,^[fn] Bigvai, Rehum,^[fn] and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: Notice in 1:11 the leader in charge of the Jews' return is named "Sheshbazzar". While in 2:2 his name is "Zerubbabel". Who was it – Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel? It could be the same man. "Sheshbazzar" was a Babylonian name, while his Hebrew name was, "Zerubbabel".

Or, Zerubbabel might've been Sheshbazzar's nephew – the possibility is implied in 1 Chronicles 3:18.

Zerubbabel was the appointed governor over the province of Judah. He was also a descendent of the last reigning Judean king.

The fact that Zerubbabel was a descendant of the David is significant, because it shows that the exiles had retained some national identity in their return.

From verse 3-35 it gives a list of the families who left Babylon to come back to Jerusalem.

Now we're not gonna go through all these names and numbers. This list names the heads of families, with the numbers of the men in those families. It means that the total number of people would be more, because the people listed here do not include the women and children — only the heads of families.

3 the people of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two;

Now in verses 36-58 we see a list of the priests, Levites, and temple workers returning from exile.

58 All the Nethinim and the children of Solomon's servants were three hundred and ninety-two.

Theologians have noted that these families represent only four of the twenty-four divisions of the priesthood established by King David in 1 Chronicles 24:3. Which means, most of the priests stayed behind in Babylon.

The total number of Levites was actually less than the number of priests that returned. This means that a remarkably small percentage of the Levites returned from Babylon.

It reminds me of christian service. Hey serving the lord can be discouraging. You look around and feel like you're alone...

Verses 59-63 Those among the priests with uncertain genealogies who returned from exile

59 And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addan,[fn] and Immer; but they could not identify their father's house or their genealogy,[fn] whether they were of Israel: 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, six hundred and fifty-two; 61 and of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz,[fn] and the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name. 62 These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled. This shows the returning Jews respect for God's law concerning the priesthood of Israel. These were those who had some claim to a priestly lineage but could not prove their genealogy. They were therefore excluded from the priesthood..

63 And the governor[fn] said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim. Those with questionable genealogies were not permanently excluded; each case required more time spent in research and seeking God.

See they didn't just throw 'em in positions cuz they had a gap to fill. **1 Tim 5:22 Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.**

64 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred men and women singers. This count was cause for sadness. Over a million Jews lived in Babylon – yet only 43,000 cared enough about God’s desires to return.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, comments, “Many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions.” Prosperity lulled them into a spiritual slumber. The Jews became too attached to their pagan surroundings. They were frozen to the familiar and chained to the comfortable.

Mark 4-parable of sower. 13 And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. 16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. 18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

66 Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five, 67 their camels four hundred and

thirty-five, and their donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty.⁶⁸ Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place: God wanted His people back in the land. He opened the door to bring them back, but it would not be easy. They'd have to rise up and move in faith!

The choice was obedience or comfort? God's way or the easy way? At times we have to make the same choice – follow God, or stay in Babylon?

Remember, remodeling “requires greater determination than you expected.” When the exiles arrive in Jerusalem they go to the Temple Mount. The sight must've broken their hearts, and brought tears to their eyes.

What was once a magnificent Temple – a reflection of God's glory - was now just a pile of rubble. Verse 68 tells us how the sight of the ruins turned some heads.

69 According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly garments. They gave generously toward a new Temple. Notice the two characteristics of their giving... which should also be true of our giving. They gave “freely” – or from their hearts.

“God loves a cheerful giver.” And it was “according to their ability” – those who were blessed much gave much. This is why the tithe is a good guideline. Those with more, give more

70 So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities. The repopulation was a humble beginning. After 70 years in exile, God fulfilled His promise to bring Israel to the land.