

A little bit of the historical context of this book. Where are we in redemptive history? Well, when this book is written, it begins in the year 538 B.C. God's people had been in Babylonian captivity for roughly 70 years. And now they are finally being sent home, sent back to Judah and Jerusalem to rebuild their temple that the Babylonians had destroyed in 586 BC. They destroyed it in 586. The first deportation took place in 605. And now it's about 538 when this book begins. But how did the people get in Babylon to begin with?

Well, they got there because they persistently refused to listen to the messengers of the word of God to them. And because they had one evil king after another evil king after another evil king. If you want to find out how we got here, you can just go read one page back in your Bible, 2 Chronicles chapter 36. One evil king after one evil king after one evil king, and God persistently sent messengers to them because he had compassion on them. And they mocked the messengers and they despised God's word.

Well now from the beginning of these exiles in 605 it's been roughly 70 years and then we come to the book of Ezra and God sends his people back from Babylonian captivity delivers them and they head back to Judah and Jerusalem and they begin to rebuild So that is where we are as we come to our book this evening.

With this in mind, let us pray and ask God to bless the reading and preaching of his word. Oh God, unless the Lord builds a house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the spirit of God works through the preaching of the word, the word is read and preached in vain. Go forth, oh God, for your glory this night. In Christ's name, amen. Ezra chapter one, this is the word of God, hear it. and give your special attention to it.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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, 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. Cyrus, king of Persia, brought these out in the charge of Mithradath, the treasurer who counted them out to Shesh-bazar, the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them, 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Shesh-bazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem. Thus ends the reading of God's holy word He had his richest blessings to it.

Well, in the historical context, it would have probably been helpful if I had mentioned that the king of Persia, Cyrus, came in and destroyed or took over the Babylonians in 539-538 BC. So Cyrus is now taking over Babylon. And Babylon is where God's people had in large number been exiled for the last, like I said, 50 to 70 years. And when he takes it over, as you can see from what we just read, he decides to send God's people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But in some ways, again, how did we get here? Well, we could say that God's people send themselves to Babylon. They had send their way to Babylon. Their persistent rejection and rebellion against God is what got them in this place.

But after 70 years, God brings them back. And what you see in that fact that God brings them back is that God is at work. Psalm 27 opens with those words, "...unless the Lord builds a house, those who build it labor in vain." And often I have thought that is a theme verse for the book of Ezra. Unless the Lord brought his people back out of Babylonian captivity, and unless the Lord aided them at every step of the way, They would have never made it back and they would have never rebuilt the temple.

It was the Lord who was at work. It was the Lord who was aiding them. It was the Lord who was enabling them to go back and to rebuild the temple. God was helping them at every step of the way. And even Ezra's name seems to indicate this reality. Ezra's name means helper. But it's been suggested by many, or at least some, that it's probably a shorthand for Ezra Yahweh, which means Yahweh helps. So even Ezra's name is an indicator that God was at work, that God was the one helping them, that God was the one bringing them back to Jerusalem, that they might rebuild the temple. Our help indeed is in the name of the Lord who makes heaven and earth. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

Now, do you know this reality that God is at work in your heart and in your life tonight? God is at work in the economy. God is at work in the ag industry. God is at work in politics. God is at work in wars. God is at work in your home life, in your family life, in your children's lives, in your grandchildren's lives. This is the same God. He is at work in Ezra 1 to deliver his people in accordance with his word. He is at work in your life, this evening.

So this is what we want to see in our text is God is at work and we'll see this in two primary ways in our text. God is at work through his word, that's our first point, God is at work through his word and God is at work for his worship. God is at work through his word and God is at work for his worship. First we see God is at work through his word verses one through four.

Let us begin to read those verses again. Verse 1, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia. Let us go ahead and stop right there because already you see in those first few words, in the first year of King Cyrus, you already begin to see that God is at work through his word.

How so? Well, 200 years previous to these events, in the book of Isaiah, God called Cyrus by name 200 years before he ever lived. He says, in essence, and I'm going to read the verse in a moment, but in essence he says this, I am going to bring about a man named Cyrus, and he is going to rebuild my temple. And you know what happened? God brought about a man named Cyrus, and Cyrus rebuilt the temple. Here's what the verse says, Isaiah 44, 28. I am the Lord who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose. Saying of Jerusalem, she shall be built and of the temple, your foundation shall be laid. Isaiah 44, 28.

Now, how in the world can God give such a specific prophecy naming not only the name of the man, but the very deeds he is going to do 200 years before that man lives and does these deeds? Do you know how he does it? Because he's God. Now, there are people who Read Isaiah and you know what they have to conclude? Because they don't believe that God is who he is and they don't believe that the Bible is true. They decide that clearly Isaiah 44 must have been written sometime after Cyrus lived because there's no other way you can explain it. When all of the historical evidence and everything in the book of Isaiah points to the reality that it was indeed written around 700.

But If you believe that, then you have to believe that God actually can do this. And for those who believe that God is who he says he is, it's really actually quite simple. It's unbelievably profound, but it's not an understandable, it's actually quite rational and reasonable.

Well, remember additionally that this Cyrus here is a Persian pagan king. Do you think when his parents were naming him, They thought to themselves, you know what we should do? We should name him Cyrus and see if he'll fulfill that prophecy in the book of Isaiah that I'm sure they had never read or maybe even heard of. But let's see, should we name him Cyrus to see if he'll fulfill that prophecy? These were pagans. More than likely, they did what all parents do. I don't really know enough about their culture, but I assume They laid at night and they sat there and they thought, what do you think about Xerxes? No, I don't like Xerxes.

What about Darius? No, kids are going to make fun of him and call him Derry when he gets older. How about Cyrus? Oh, yeah, I like that. Let's go with Cyrus. That's a good name. They weren't trying to fulfill the word of God when they named their son Cyrus.

But you know what they were doing? They were fulfilling the word of God because God is sovereign. So already, at the very start of this book, we see God is at work through his word. But this continues on through verse one, because not only were prophecies from Isaiah fulfilled, but explicitly, look what the text goes on to say in verse one.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord, not by Isaiah, but it says here specifically, by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia." So why did God stir up the heart of King Cyrus to make this proclamation? Why did he stir him up to make this edict to send God's people back to Jerusalem? The reason God stirred up his heart to do this is to fulfill his word by the mouth of Jeremiah the prophet.

But this begs the question, doesn't it? What specific prophecies or verses in Jeremiah are being fulfilled here? If Jeremiah's prophecy is indeed being fulfilled, then we ought to be able to go to the book of Jeremiah and see which texts are being fulfilled. And we see that there are three texts in particular that are being fulfilled. You're welcome to try to turn to these, but I'm going to ask that we do turn to the final one, but at least read the first two. The first one is Jeremiah 25 verses 11 and 12. There we read this.

This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity declares the Lord." That's Jeremiah 25, 11, and 12. Then in Jeremiah 29, 10, we read this.

For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. Now, while there are debates about how exactly we should think of the 70 years being fulfilled here, there are debates there, when exactly did that 70 years happen, The point that you see is this, that God is fulfilling his word. He said it would be 70 years, and there are various ways you can calculate that, but the point is this, God does what he says he's gonna do. He does indeed bring his people back.

But there's one passage that I think is of particular importance, and is especially, if you could put it like this, is especially in view in Ezra chapter one, verse one, There's a specific verse that I believe is in view, and it actually comes from Jeremiah 51, verses one and 11. It might be helpful to turn there, Jeremiah 51, verses one and 11. Many commentators, not none of them, if there was none of them, then I wouldn't say it. The chances of me finding something that nobody else found is exactly zero.

But many commentators, I do believe, miss this one, and I actually think it's the most directly related to our text from Ezra 1.1. Jeremiah 51, I'm gonna read verse one and verse 11.

Verse one, thus says the Lord, behold, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon. Notice that language, I will stir up the spirit. I will stir up the spirit. Now look down at verse 11. sharpen the arrows, take up the shields. The Lord has, and notice again, stirred up the spirit of the king of the Medes because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it. For that is the vengeance of the Lord. And then again, notice this part, the vengeance, why? For his temple. And that will come up again later in the sermon, for his temple. Notice in both Jeremiah 51 verse 1 and verse 11, there was that phrase, stirred up the spirit, stirred up the spirit. Well, that's the exact language of Ezra 1-1.

And I've did my best to research all the times stirred up the spirit is found in the Old Testament. In my calculation, which I do of course believe is right, but I believe it's eight times. It's not like it's all over the place. Two of them are in Ezra 1, the next one's gonna be in verse 5, and then two of them are in Jeremiah 51. It seems pretty clear to me that what Ezra is specifically saying is God, just like he said he would, the language is incredible.

Think about this for a moment. Literally, the language stirred up the spirit is not all over the place in the Old Testament. Hear that, it's not, I can take you to those verses if you really want to, right? But what I wanna see is this. Literally in Jeremiah 51, God didn't just say he's gonna raise up Cyrus. He literally says, I'm going to stir up his spirit.

Specifically, those exact words in Ezra 1.1 says, God stirred up his spirit. The profoundness of this is simply the exactness with which God fulfills his word. It's literally exactly, it's not similar to what he said he was gonna do, it's exactly what God said he was going to do.

And what was the result of this stirring? Well, as we said, it's what leads to this proclamation from Cyrus. So that he, that is Cyrus, made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing. So don't you see in this that God is at work through his word. The result of God's stirring Cyrus is Cyrus' making this proclamation to send his people home. But did Cyrus do this because he was a believer? Did he trust in Yahweh? Was that his motives?

Well, someone might come to that conclusion. Look at the words that you find in verse 2. These are the words of the edict. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, this is supposed to be Cyrus speaking, the Lord, the God of heaven. Again, that's Yahweh, the covenant making name. The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. That sounds like great humility and reverence. And he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

While this might sound like he is trusting in the one living and true God, it might be helpful to know that if you were to look at other ways that Cyrus treated other people, you can look at this historically, he is likely not doing this for any sort of real belief in Yahweh.

It's diplomatic, it's political, he's a pluralist. He's doing what he thinks is best for his kingdom. He was a syncretist, right? Mixing of different religions. He was not a believer. Now, if you think otherwise, this should hopefully convince you that he indeed was not a believer. He was not doing this because he had love for Christ. Isaiah 45, verses four and five, speaking of Cyrus in the context. Isaiah 45, he is speaking of Cyrus in the context. Isaiah 45, verse four and five, here's what we read. I call you, that is Cyrus, by your name.

I name you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord and there is no other. Besides me, there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me. So twice in Isaiah 45, verses four and five, we read, though you do not know me. Even though he does not know Yahweh as personal Lord and Savior of his life. He's not trusting in him alone for salvation. God is using him.

From Cyrus's perspective, this is just political. This is just diplomatic. But what Cyrus does for diplomatic purposes, God does to fulfill his word. Cyrus's edict was God's decree. Cyrus set the people free for political agenda. God delivered his people because he wanted them to build him a temple and worship him.

The reality of God working through this sort of decreeing is seen throughout the book of Ezra. In the latter half of Ezra chapter six, verse 14, we read this, continuing this theme of God working out his decree. Ezra chapter six, verse 14b, Listen to how God's decree is working through pagan king's decree. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes, king of Persia. You see, God decreed to work through the decrees of the pagan kings. Cyrus does not speak apart from God's sovereignty, but in accordance with God's sovereignty. But don't you see in all this the marvelous working of God through his word?

He said he's going to do it and he does it exactly like he says. Well, what does this mean for you this evening? This means that you can trust God's word at every point and in every detail. There's not a jot or tittle of the whole of scripture that you can't trust. It's trustworthy and true. So when he says he will give you your daily bread, what he means is he will give you your daily bread.

He cares for his people. It's the temptation of the human heart to doubt God. It's a temptation of the human heart not to believe he cares for you. But when you read a text like this, it's very clear that he does. But sometimes it takes 70 years. So you wait and you pray and you keep being patient. Perhaps you're here this evening and you have children or grandchildren and you don't know the state of their soul or you have reason to doubt the state of their soul.

What a text like this says is God is faithful to his word. What does that mean? In that particular context, it means pray God's covenant promises for your children and your grandchildren. God keeps his word. He was faithful to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. He keeps his word. We pray God's covenant promises. He keeps his word and he's done it. Primarily we know his yes and amen in Christ Jesus himself.

But this text also reminds you that God is at work even through worldly powers, doesn't it? Kings like Cyrus here. In our wars and in the things we face, God is at work and it should bring us great comfort. You know, in our reformed circles, we, by God's kindness, generally have a lot of good doctrine about God's sovereignty and his providential control over whatsoever comes to pass.

We speak of these things very openly, and that's a good thing. Praise the Lord. However. Our doctrine can be right and our lives can still often act contrary to our very doctrine that we profess. In other words, how do you actually live? This text really clearly tells you that God keeps his word. But do we live like God keeps his word?

Do you trust him when you don't know how you're going to pay the bills? Do you trust him when he tells you that when you repent of your sins, he is faithful and just to forgive you your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness? Do you trust him when he tells you the laws in the word of God and he says they're good for your soul? Do you trust him at his word?

Do you believe that he is sovereign in your hardships, in the darkness of the grave? Even then he is sovereign. When you suffer and you see death in your family and your loved ones, when there are horrible things that go on, people you know and love, awful things happen in their lives that you cannot begin to understand why God would let happen. This text says God is in control and you must trust him.

Well, secondly, this evening, God is at work for his worship, for his worship. So we saw God is at work through his word. Now we see God is at work for his worship, verses five through 11. Well, throughout verses five through 11, you see God providing the supplies necessary and the means necessary for his people to return and rebuild the temple. Look at verse five.

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. Notice that as God had sovereignly stirred up Cyrus' heart to make this decree, back in verse one, so God is sovereignly stirring up his people's heart to hear the decree and to receive it and to go back, at least a group of his people receive it and they

go back. God is stirring up their hearts. Before we go any further, what does this mean for you? What does this mean for me? Notice that God is the one stirring up his people's heart to go back and rebuild the temple.

Why do you show up to evening worship because God stirs up your heart to go. Why do you open your Bible? Because God stirs up your heart to open your Bible. Why do you pray? Because God stirs up your heart to pray. Why do you ever do deeds of necessity and mercy? Why do you ever care for others, rather, is what I mean. Why do you ever show kindness?

And the fundamental reason is because God is stirring up your heart. You don't show up to church because you're better than anyone else, nor do you open up your Bible because there's something inherently better about you than another person. It's because God serves up your heart. Now, in saying that, does that mean that you get a warm, fuzzy feeling every time you get ready to get in the car, go to church? Not necessarily, or when you open your Bible. But what a text like this is saying is that behind it all is the sovereign, gracious, merciful work of your God. That is why you seek him. That is why you, in this context, go back and try to rebuild the temple. But not only does God help them get this decree or enable them to get this decree that they might begin to head home, he actually goes one step further.

You can see throughout verses 5 through 11 that he sends them back with everything they need to do the job. Look, for example, at verse 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." And then it goes on to share about how Cyrus even had the temple items that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar in a previous generation, he had those restored and they go back to Jerusalem as well.

Why is all of this detail in there? Really the biggest reason it is in there isn't just to tell you that God provides for his people, which is an important factor. But more importantly, and it's quite obvious as you read through this book, it's because God is saying he saves these people so that they might worship him. All of these items aren't just a random assortment of things so they can have a big house, although that is one of the sins that happens in the book of Haggai, but that's another story. But it's not just so that they can have a nice house that these things happen. It's so that they can build the temple of the Lord and worship God rightly. God is jealous for his own worship.

When in redemptive history has God done this before? We actually sang about it in that Psalm from 105 this evening. It mentions that there, and in the book of Exodus, it mentions that when God delivered his people out of the land of Egypt, he provided with them, from the hands of the Egyptian, gold and silver and jewelry and so forth. And where do you think they got all they needed to build that big tabernacle in the middle of the desert? from the stuff that God had provided for them from the Egyptians.

And so he's doing this again, he's showing his faithful, and he's showing his zeal for his own worship. He's saying, I'm saving you, and he is, he does love them, but he is also saying, I am saving you for a purpose, and that purpose is to give me the worship which is due my name.

Well, as we slow down and begin to draw to a close, I do want to read a couple of things that I think can be helpful. And I don't normally bring books into the pulpit, but I'm going to read a few things. God did not save you here this evening just so that you could receive all the good things that happen in Christ Jesus for you. Not just so that you could be declared righteous. Not just so you could be adopted as a son or a daughter.

Our first catechism, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. That is the reason we exist. When Jesus is speaking with the woman at the well, remember what He says here. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. For the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. So it says here that God is seeking people for what purpose? God is seeking people to worship him. And then listen to these words from this little book here. There's plenty we might say about what the cross achieves but for our purposes we'll focus on one theme. The cross makes worship possible. Did you hear that?

The cross, apart from Jesus on the cross, there's no way you're gonna be able to go to God and worship him because you'll be blown up because you're a sinner and he's infinitely holy. Apart from that cross, there is no access to worship him. Think of Jesus's cry as darkness enveloped him at Golgotha. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He was quoting the first line of Psalm 22. If you take a moment to read that psalm, you'll see it's an incredible prophecy of the crucifixion. The first 21 verses walk in painstaking detail through the agony of the cross, the descent of Christ to death. But the psalm doesn't end there. Verse 22 is a turning point. a transition from death to life.

Quote, I will tell of your name to my brothers. In the midst of the congregation, I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him. And stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel. The one who went down to death has now returned, and why?

To lead the congregation in worship. We'll return to this idea at various points in the coming chapters, but for now, just notice that the very psalm that Jesus uses to give us a glimpse into what's going on at Calvary is the same psalm that prophesies that the crucified one will rise again to lead his people in Worship. Worship is the goal of atonement. Worship is the goal of atonement. James Henley Thornwell said somewhere that the greatest act of worship in human history was Christ on the cross. Christ was offering himself up in worship.

And if we want to be like Christ and we want to be like God then we need to be people who worship and worship him. And so this evening I want to encourage us to be a people who continue to love worship. In God's kindness I do believe that this is a church where there is a high value on the worship of God. But it must continue that way because there's a high value on the worship of God throughout Scripture because God is worthy of all of our worship. And of course, this extends beyond just corporate worship. It extends to our whole lives, but particularly in corporate worship.

God saved the people here we saw in the text, and he saved them for this purpose of worship. God is at work through his word, and God is at work for his worship. To God be all the glory forever and ever, amen. Almighty God, we thank you and praise you for your worship.

We thank you, O God, that we get to gather morning and evening every Lord's Day and worship you in spirit and in truth, that you have been pleased to preserve us, an unworthy group, to hold to trying to worship you in spirit and in truth, Oh God, we thank you that you are a God who keeps your word, that you are a God who is merciful, that you are a God who says what you're gonna do it, and even though sometimes it takes 70 years or more, you do it. Would that bring us comfort and courage as we go about our daily lives? Would your sovereignty not merely be a theological idea, but would it be something we embrace and live as if it were true? God, we thank you for who you are, and we ask that you would bless us the rest of this worship service in Christ's name, amen.