

Free Indeed
Ezra/Nehemiah
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Bible Text: Ezra 1:1-11
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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the first chapter of the book of Ezra, your Old Testament, just after Chronicles, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, to kind of put it. It's always good to learn that when you're young. Actually I think it's one of the things we need to make sure everyone learns in our church by the time they're like seven or eight. Isn't it amazing how you can remember everything when you're that young? It's just like so easy and as you get older, you can remember but it's a lot harder. You have to want it a lot more and you have to work against age, frailty of human life.

Well, we're gonna look at Ezra 1 and we introduced this book last Sunday. It's the passage that, the book that we want, Ezra/Nehemiah actually I mentioned is really, I think, one book in the original that God gave it through one editor who put together the memoirs of Ezra, the memoirs of Nehemiah. It may have been Ezra, it may have been someone else, we don't know, but it was someone inspired by the Spirit and they put together this book in one work to give to the people of God, and so we want to read, we're gonna read Ezra and Nehemiah, work through those consecutively, Lord willing, the weeks and months to come, and this morning we're gonna read the first chapter and the title of the message is "Free Indeed." Free indeed, and we're talking about, we'll see in this book and in this passage that we're talking about spiritual freedom, we're talking about true freedom. Free indeed means free in reality, and I borrow those words from Jesus when he says in John 8:36, "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed," and I believe that we're seeing here in the book of Ezra a type and a picture of the freedom that will come in Christ which is true spiritual freedom. This isn't just about physical freedom and physical freedom is a wonderful thing, it's a beautiful thing we should be thankful for in its appropriate place.

As Americans, we are free people. This week we saw the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of D-Day, June 6, 1944, when over 150,000 Allied soldiers, mostly American, attacked the Third Reich, the National Socialist Party. The Nazis had gained dominion over all of Western Europe and the American army and the British army, Canadians, the Australians, even French, free French, free Polish, assaulted the beaches of Normandy in the greatest maritime invasion in world history, D-Day. And what was

that bringing? That was bringing freedom and liberation to people who were oppressed, who were under the dark night of Nazism, a wicked perverse regime.

So that's a glorious thing and it's worthy to celebrate and as I watched some of the commemorations, some of the speeches, I was touched myself in thinking about it, and you hear the soldiers. There was a guy that must have been, I think he was 100, and he was talking about why he went and it was to, I can't remember how he said it, but basically it was something like and it was a 100-year-old man, you know, he said it was to take Hitler down, gotta take him down because he was oppressing all those people. And it's a wonderful thing to be thankful for but what we're gonna see in this passage is a much greater freedom that the Bible is interested in helping us to experience. It is the true freedom of the soul. It is spiritual freedom.

So as beautiful as political freedom is, it pales in comparison to spiritual freedom. Why? Because political freedom is temporal, it's of this order that is passing away. Spiritual freedom is eternal. Far better to be oppressed politically and free spiritually. Far better to live under slavery physically but free spiritually. It's not to justify those things, those things are wicked but far better and far more important to be spiritually free, and we see how in the book of Ezra as God is teaching us in the Old Testament what salvation really is as the Old Testament, as he reveals himself progressively, and revelation is progressive. God gives us a little bit and a little bit more and he's building basically an understanding in the Scriptures of who he is and what's wrong with us and how that can be fixed. Essentially the whole Bible is answering the question, in one sense, how can sinners be made right with a holy God? All of Scripture is aimed at answering that question because that is the fundamental problem. We are in sin and we are separated from God and in reality we are slaves, slaves of sin. Jesus said in John 8, the same passage I mentioned earlier, verses 31 to 36, "He who sins, the one who sins is the slave of sin," and he came to set us free from that kind of slavery, that kind of oppression.

So we're talking about true spiritual freedom, the title, "Free Indeed." Let's look with me at verse 1. We'll read verses 1 to 11 of Ezra 1, the entire first chapter actually.

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: 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 appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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 Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

Now that was the Cyrus edict, the Cyrus proclamation. This was a document that was circulated throughout the entire Persian Empire and we have it quoted there in its entirety. Now verse 5, this happened afterwards,

5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. 6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering. 7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles. 11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we come now to Your word and we are reminded of our great need of Your grace. Lord, sin has darkened our understanding and even with new hearts we still wrestle to understand Your word and we need Your grace to enlighten our eyes, Your Spirit to open our hearts, Your power to apply it to us in a way that will change us for Your glory. So our eyes are upon You, Lord. May You have Your way in Your people, in our hearts today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

To be free indeed. To be free indeed. This is something of what the Lord is teaching us in this period of redemptive history. I mentioned that Scripture in the Bible we have God answering this one question, how can sinners be made right with God, and he answers it progressively. He's building our understanding and making us ready then to receive this salvation which comes in Jesus Christ and the whole Old Testament is basically God creating, I think I mentioned last week as one of the Puritans said, God creating a womb in which to bring his Son; that is, the Old Testament lays the groundwork and provides the frame for Jesus then to be unveiled. You can't make sense of Jesus without the Old Testament. This is one of the errors of just reading your New Testament all the time or translating the Bible just in the New Testament. I mean, certainly that's where you start because it gives Jesus, but to really understand who Jesus is and what he's done, you must have the Old Testament. It's one of the reasons we go back and forth between New Testament and the Old Testament. We worked through James and now we go to Ezra/Nehemiah, and then, Lord willing, we'll go to a New Testament book after this.

But God is unfolding for us what it means to be right with him and what basically if you step back from it, let me talk with you about this idea of progressive revelation for a moment. God begins giving his word and he gives it book by book. He gives the first five

books pretty rapidly through Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the Torah, the law. He gives them all around 1406 before Moses dies certainly, they're all written, 1406 BC he gives five books. Now what you have to remember is God is writing to people that we're gonna find out are spiritually blind, who don't understand anything about God, about themselves. We have a, you know, we come into the world with a high view of self, a low view of God. We come into the world with a low view of sin. Sin is just not that big a deal, we don't think. We say things like, "To err is human, to forgive divine." That is not in the Bible. Now it happens to be true if you will seek forgiveness in the one way you can seek forgiveness, by repenting and placing your faith in Christ, but it's not enough to say just, "Well, to be human is to err." No, to be human was not to err. To be a sinner is to err and we are morally responsible for our sin according to the Scriptures.

But so mankind is in the dark and he gives his first written revelation to the people who come out of the exodus. Remember, I'm telling you Moses gives the first five books and so it's after the exodus, we talked about this last week, the history of that leading up to that point. He gives the first five books and what he's doing is he's trying to show them, "Listen, sin is a much bigger deal than you think it is. Sin has done far greater damage than you think it has. Sin has created a chasm between you and God that is humanly impossible to overcome. Sin is a deadly malady. It's an eternal sentence to hell. We deserve to suffer forever for what we've done."

He wants to show us that and so that's what's happening even in Genesis. I mean, just think about the flow of the first 11 books of the Bible. Genesis 1 and 2, God creates everything and it's good. Genesis 3, man sins. How bad is sin? Well, you know, Eve just ate a piece of fruit. Genesis 4, how bad is sin? Already her two sons, one murders the other because he's jealous that the other gave a better offering than he did. Kills him. Genesis 5, we find that one of Cain's descendants is bragging about how many people he's murdered. Genesis 6, things are so bad, have regressed so dramatically, evil is so pervasive in mankind that God must destroy all flesh with a flood, saved eight people. How bad is sin? Sin is bad. God cleanses the world, as it were, works through Noah and his three sons and their wives to replenish the earth. Surely it's gonna be better now. Genesis 8, 9, Noah gets drunk and there's this weird thing with him and his boys. In chapter 11, we have the tower of Babel where man is now trying to build a tower to heaven to make a way for himself to establish his own glory apart from God and there's something pretty powerful about humanity when it comes together like that because God says nothing will be impossible for them. They're gonna somehow convince themselves that everything is good, that everything is wonderful, and they're going to die in their sins and go to hell, and so the Lord comes down and confuses the languages. He has to make two great interactions to save mankind from destruction in the first 11 chapters.

Then chapter 12, God begins to show his way of salvation by coming down. God comes down to Abram. How can man, how can sinners be made right with God? Can man go up? No, God must come down. God must do something. So the picture of salvation becomes clear in the covenant with Abraham. The Lord promises three things, three essential promises to Abraham. He says, "I'm going to give you, I'm gonna make you a

great nation," he promises a seed. "I'm going to give you a land," he promises the land of Canaan. "And I'm going to be with you and bless you," his presence. The seed, the land and the presence, and what he's doing in Abraham's life is he's teaching all of the rest of us how we can be made right with him, because those three things are a key part. How do you become a part of the people of God? How do you dwell in God's land? How do you experience God's presence? The way he deals with Israel is teaching us that. As John Calvin said, "It's as if the Lord baby-talks with us in the Scriptures." The word is, of course, he spoke French, and so I don't know what the word in French is but the word in English translated he prattles with us. God prattles with us. He baby-talks. He stoops down to communicate to us in a way we can understand. That's what the Old Testament is him doing, and truly there's a sense in which he's always stooping down to baby-talk with us, we just get to be a little more clever than we used to be by his grace.

So he's teaching us through Abraham and he shows us these are the three blessings and how they're gonna come. Genesis 15, you have another key moment in the life of Abraham where Abraham is wanting to know, "Why haven't You given me a son yet? You said You were gonna give me a seed, You're gonna make me a great nation, and it's been 11 years and my wife's still not pregnant and we're getting older every day." Abraham is 85 at this point and God says, "Look to the heavens and see if you can count the stars, thus will your descendants be." And it said Abram believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. This is telling us that the way to be saved, Genesis 15 is telling you the way to be saved and right with God is by faith alone. God is telling us that in the very first book of the Bible, what's wrong with you is so great, what's wrong with me is so radical that I can't overcome it. I must look to God, the promise of God, and place my faith completely in his promise.

And he continues unpacking this, the whole covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. "What is your part," he says, "to be in this relationship with Me?" And God again is prattling with us. It's to circumcise yourself and your sons on the eighth day and every male in your house. So Abram does that. What is that about? God's teaching us and we see it even in the people of Israel who received this written revelation could see it because God gave them not only Genesis but he gave them Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 10:16 it says this, "circumcise your hearts." It's not about physical circumcision done to something in the flesh, that was a picture that something has to happen to your heart. If you want to dwell with God, you must approach him by faith like Abraham did and you must have a heart change. In the same way that circumcision cuts away something, you've got to have God cut something away from your heart and these are like little streams, little tiny almost creeks that are beginning to turn into a river, flowing together into, that will eventually converge in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Well, what happens is God continues to build on that through the Old Testament and he's teaching us more and more and more. I mentioned last time that the purpose of the exodus, remember, that why did God allow his people to go into slavery for 400 years? I mean, he promised Abram, "I'm gonna make you a great nation. I'm gonna give you the land of Canaan," and yet there's a famine under when Jacob, his grandson, has his 12

boys, remember? There's a famine and Joseph is sold into slavery and the people have to go down to live in Egypt to survive. After that Pharaoh dies, they become slaves for 400 years. Now God had prophesied this in Genesis 15 but why did the Lord do it that way? So that he could deliver them out of slavery to take them into Canaan.

There's a picture, a word picture happening. How do you get saved? How do you come to dwell? And Canaan's a type of heaven and we see this, I mentioned this last month, I hope some of you read this, Hebrews 11, Hebrews 3, Hebrews 4, makes this clear, that Canaan is a type of heaven. You enter into God's rest is entering into Canaan. In Hebrews 11:12 and following, Abram showed great faith because he was not looking for the land of Canaan. One of the things that is interesting is God says, "I'm gonna give you a land and I'm going to give you a son," and if you step back from it for a moment, Abram waited 25 years for a son. He was already 75, he waited 25 years for a son. It's like what was happening? Why did God make him wait? God doesn't do anything slap-dash like we do. I mean, there are things, I could tell you I'm going to do something, I don't do it, you know, for three weeks because I just didn't think of it, right? And some of us, our wives lament the fact that we're like that. God's not like that. He does everything on time. He waits 25 years because he's building Abraham's faith but why doesn't he get him the land? Even though he gets a son, he never gets the land of Canaan. He dwells as a stranger in tents in the land. The only thing he owns in Canaan is the burial plot he purchases to bury his wife. His son Isaac comes along and God says, "I'm gonna give you this land. I'm gonna make you a great nation." Isaac never owns anything more than what he inherited from his dad, the burial plot where now his mother and his dad are buried, and where he and his wife will be buried also. Jacob inherits from Isaac, "This land is your land. God is gonna give it to you." God tells him, "I'm giving it to you. I'm gonna make you a great nation," but Jacob never possesses anything more than the burial plot and he gets lain there just beside his granddad and his grandmother, his dad and his mom, buried.

What is going on with that? This is where it's just helpful to think and don't just read it but just ask the question, "Lord, why did You do this? And then why 400 years of slavery?" Because the Lord is prattling with us and what he's teaching us is Canaan is, and this is what the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 11, that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob... Let me just show you that. Let's look at it together. Hold your place in Ezra. Hebrews 11:13, well actually verse 9. We'll look at verse 13 also but verse 9. This is talking about Abraham, "By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." This becomes even clearer in verses 13 to 16, "All these died in faith," speaking of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "All of these died in faith without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." They came to

understand the reason the Lord is not giving us Canaan is because Canaan is a type and if he gave it to us too quickly, we would just have enjoyed it and we would have missed it.

Canaan is a type of dwelling in his presence forever in heaven and so what he's doing then, back to, back now fast-forward ahead to the 400 years of slavery in Egypt. God goes down and he says, "I'm going to deliver you and I'm going to take you out of Egypt and I'm going to put you in the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey," because he's teaching them to be saved, to come to know God you have to be delivered from slavery. He allowed his people to experience the slavery so he could picture for every other generation themselves included, every generation, this is what salvation is, to be delivered from bondage in Egypt, the place of darkness and evil, be delivered by the Passover Lamb. 1 Corinthians 5:7 picks this up where it says Christ, our Passover, has been slain. The Passover lamb typified, was a type of Jesus Christ.

So the Lord is teaching us through the Old Testament and there are a lot of other steps along the way that we're not going to go into today but that's what's happening as he works in the time of the judges and the time of the kings, he's teaching them, he's teaching them that to dwell in God's land you need to be submitted to the kingship of God's King, a king like David but greater than David, but you can't do it, you can't submit to God's King because you need a new heart. That's the whole reason that we have the Babylonian captivity, they rebelled against God and they are sent away and during the time of the exile which happened in 606 to 536, 70 years, during those 70 years the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were especially important. They are the exilic prophets. Jeremiah ministered from about 625 to 580, so he just ministered to the first 15 years or so, I mean, the first few years of the exile, but Ezekiel picks up in 597 and ministers for about 30 years, 25 or 30 years, and what they make really clear that God is going to do something new and different. Jeremiah 31:31 and following, "I'm going to make a new covenant, I'm going to write My law on your heart." Ezekiel 36:24 and following, he says, "I'm going to sprinkle clean water on you and make you clean. I'm going to cut out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. A day is coming when this is going to happen."

So what's happening is the Lord is showing us more and more and more and all along people are being saved throughout the Old Testament as they received the word that they've received and they placed their hope in a distant way in Christ. God must do it for me and he's going to send a Savior, a Passover lamb. He's going to send the offering of atonement for us. And so they are looking ahead. Well, come into Ezra, what's happened here is the exile happened and they were cast out of the land again, now they are brought back in. For 70 years they were in captivity, they were separated from the land, and we pick up in verse 1 of chapter 1 with essentially the declaration of freedom. They are set free. This was the most wonderful words that a Jew, a faithful Jew could hear in that day. Cyrus says, "You are set free. Go back and build God's house," because one of the things the Lord had done, again in his prattling with us, one of the things that was so critical was the house of God. The house of God.

The way this unfolds in the Old Testament as well is important. You have the Lord when he takes them out of Egypt and he takes them into Canaan, on the way to Canaan, he reveals himself in a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud, and the presence of God is visibly manifest, and one of the things that he tells them to do is to make a tabernacle. It's a tent actually, an ornate tent. It was a traveling temple where they could offer sacrifices, where they could keep the ark of the covenant, where the Holy of Holies, the most holy place would be, and the holy place where the priests would be, and this was called the tent of meeting. The tent of meeting, 146 times in the Old Testament you have that phrase, "The tent of meeting," and what God was saying is, "If you want to meet with Me, you must come to My tent, the one place. You must make your sacrifice there."

It becomes, as you go forward when David has in his heart to build a temple, build a house for the Lord, a permanent dwelling for God in Jerusalem, he's not able to but his son is. The Lord tells him, "I'm going to build you a house but your son, the son will build My house," and Solomon builds a house. The tabernacle is replaced by the temple, this glorious building where the presence of God dwells and where all sacrifices are to be made and where every Jew is to pray toward that temple. The Lord is teaching, "There is one place that you meet Me. You may want to invent in your mind all kinds of ways that you can meet Me, you can only meet Me at the appointed place." In fact, the tent of meeting, I mentioned that occurs about 146 times in the Bible, "meeting" actually would be better translated "appointed." It's the tent of appointment. It's actually a word which means the noun there comes from a verb which means "to fix; to place; like to appoint something," and you know, you have a meeting, you make an appointment, right? This is emphasizing the fact that it's an appointment not that you're meeting. Now you're meeting, yes, but he's saying, "If you want to meet with Me, you've got to come at the time that I said and the place that I said." It's like if you made an appointment with somebody, you make an appointment with your doctor, no, that doesn't make sense. Let's make it you make an appointment with a friend over lunch and there is a time set, he says, "Let's meet at 12 at such and such restaurant," and you decide, "You know, I don't really think I want to go at 12, I'm going to go at 10, or I'm going to go at 2," and you go at 2 and you're like, "Hey, where are you?" "What do you mean where am I? We appointed the time was 12 and it was at this place." God says, "The tent of meeting, this is the place that you meet Me." We would like to meet other places. We would like to make God however we want him to be and approach him however we want to approach him. God says, "No, you must approach Me the way I tell you to approach Me. This is the place and this is the way."

Now when you read then through the Old Testament and you read through like 1 & 2 Kings and you're understanding the big picture here, it starts making sense of a lot of the things that are talked about. For instance, in 1 & 2 Kings, you have the two nations, remember we talked about this last week, the one nation of Israel that was under one monarch, Saul, then David, then Solomon, that one nation becomes two. As a part of God's judgment, Solomon's son Rehoboam loses 10 of the tribes and you have Israel and Judah, and 1 & 2 Kings recounts the history going back and forth from Israel to Judah, from Israel to Judah, different kings, but one of the themes that you see is, that one of the things that really bothers the Lord and makes him angry in Kings is the presence of the

high places. In fact, he'll talk about some of the, there aren't many good kings but some of the better kings, there is only really a handful but the better kings it'll say something about them like, "He walked in the way of David his father, only he did not remove the high places." Like he was really good except didn't remove the high places. What's up with the high places? The high places were places where you could go and offer sacrifices, burn incense, and meet with God. They were franchises of the temple. They were unauthorized franchises of the temple set up by people who wanted to make it easy to worship God, and God said, "I hate that."

In fact, you can really see the anger of God in the frustration, his frustration with the wickedness of man. When you look at 1 Kings 12 and 13 and then watch this refrain from the rest of the Old Testament, 1 Kings 12 and 13, we have the sin of Jeroboam. Jeroboam is the first king of the northern kingdom. The kingdom splits into two, 10 tribes go with the north, Jeroboam, two tribes with the south, Rehoboam, Solomon's son, and they are not twin brothers or anything, just happen to have the names Rehoboam, Jeroboam. It's hard to keep those, I wish it was just Jim and Bill, it would be easier in our minds. But Rehoboam, Jeroboam. Jeroboam, Rehoboam was sinful also but Jeroboam was exceedingly sinful, so bad that you will see a refrain throughout the rest of the books of Kings like this, it will talk about the worst ungodly kings and it will say this, "He walked in the sins of his father Jeroboam," and that's the worst thing that you can say about someone. What was the sin of Jeroboam? Jeroboam's sins were recounted in 1 Kings 12, the last few verses, he made two temples, one in Bethel and where was the other one? Dan, one in Dan. One way up north and one in the southern part of the northern kingdom. He didn't want his people to go down to Jerusalem where God had authorized the one place for his temple to be, it was in Judah, the southern kingdom, and so he created two new temples and he just did what was in his heart. That's what you see in 1 Kings 12, and God hated that because God is teaching something very important in this temple motif in the Old Testament. He's teaching us that you don't approach God the way that you make up. You don't approach God as seems right to you. You will not come to know the Lord if you try to make it up as you go. You will not come to know the Lord if you do what seems right. "There is a way that seems right to a man but the way thereof is the way of death." It's repeated twice in the Proverbs.

So the message is you go to God where he tells you to go and that is Jerusalem, the one place, and the temple, and he outlines how worship is to be done, he outlines how the incense is to be burned. Everything about approaching God is the way he says. Now what's going on with that? He's ultimately teaching us what Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but by Me." Now how do you make that jump? John 1:14, John opens his Gospel talking about Jesus in his deity, created all things, and then he says, "and the Word," in verse 14, "became flesh." The Creator, the second person of the Trinity became flesh, "and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory." The word in Greek literally translated for "dwelt" is "pitched his tent." "The Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us and we beheld His glory."

Glory belongs to God and the tent that he pitched is the tabernacle, and this is why John records for us in chapter 2 right in the very beginning of the book, he tells us about this

first cleansing of the temple that the other Gospel writers just tell us about the second cleansing at the end of Jesus' ministry; there was one at the beginning, one at the end, bookending his ministry. John tells us about the first cleansing in the temple in John 2 when Jesus cleanses the temple and the Jews ask him, "By what authority do You do this?" And Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again." And they said, "It took 46 years to build this temple," they are looking at the earthly temple, "and you're going to raise it in three days?" John adds, "They didn't understand Jesus was talking about the temple of His body." You see, where does the glory dwell now? It's no longer behind the veil in the temple in the Holy of Holies, the glory dwells in the man Christ Jesus and what all of this has been teaching us, there's only one way to know God and you must go to Jesus Christ, "No other name given among men by which we must be saved," and that's why God cared so much about the high places and the other temples because he knew the sinfulness of man's heart is we will find, we will try to find another way. We won't submit. But there is no other way, only Jesus.

So now understanding that, that Jesus comes and that's about 540 years, well, he's born about 540 years after what we're reading about now back in Ezra 1, so it's showing you how that trajectory is happening. We're seeing that, you know, the tabernacle becomes the temple and why is God so concerned about the temple? Because the temple is where you meet God. Well, what has happened in the Babylonian captivity is the people were cast out of the land, which is a type of dwelling in God's presence, and the temple is destroyed, and they are thinking, you know, "We can't worship God anymore." Now the faithful still worshiped toward Jerusalem, in fact, when you read Daniel and Daniel is praying in Daniel 6, remember Daniel in the lions' den, the story? They are told not to pray to any other God but the Emperor, and Daniel prays as he always did every day, he prays on his knees before an open window facing Jerusalem because that's the place where the glory dwells. At that point in history, that was how God was revealing himself and if you wanted to know him, you had to go to Jerusalem.

So if that's the case, to be cast away from Jerusalem, to be cast a thousand miles away from Jerusalem, to have the temple destroyed is the greatest calamity imaginable. Psalm 137 speaks of the agony of the captives in Babylon. They talk about their captor said, "Play for us one of the songs of Zion." You know, their captors, these are the Babylonians that are ruling over everybody, all the oppressed people, "Hey, tell us some of your good music. Play one of your songs." And the psalmist says, "How can I sing the song of Zion in a foreign land? How can I sing the song of Jerusalem in a foreign land? How can I sing the song of the place where God's glory dwells when I am so far away from it?"

So when the Cyrus edict happens, what that is is permission to now go back to the place where God's glory is. This is massively important. It's not just political liberation. In fact, it's very interesting it's not really political liberation at all. The edict that sets them free doesn't set them free to be a free and independent nation under a king. It does not. Why? Because God is teaching us something. It's not about an earthly kingdom. "I was using that for a period of time and now I'm at the next point." It's like you've learned your two plus two's, now you're ready for decimals, now you're ready for fractions, now you're

ready for pre-algebra. Oh boy! Spiritually speaking. You see, it was never really about an earthly kingdom because this earth must be burned up. "I must make all things new." So when he liberates them from Babylon and he sends them back, they go back and they are at first thinking, "We're going to be like the old days. We're gonna have the glory of the old days. We're gonna be under a Davidic monarch. Somehow God is doing this." But they are not, they are under Persian domination for centuries. The beauty, what the freedom was, was true freedom, though. It was spiritual freedom. For the first time they would have the opportunity to go to the Temple Mount, they would have the opportunity to offer sacrifices when the temple was rebuilt in the place in the altar there in the courts of the Lord. They would have the opportunity to truly dwell in the presence of God again.

That is the beauty of it, that is the freedom that was made known to them in this decree and what I want us to do in the time we have left is look at an important point. We're talking about spiritual freedom and I want to talk about now the power for spiritual freedom. Next time we'll talk about the purpose of spiritual freedom but the power for spiritual freedom. Where does spiritual freedom come from? How do you, how are you set free? What does this passage teach us?

Verse 1, "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying," and then we have those next three verses. The key phrase in that verse, verse 1, is "in order to fulfill the word of the LORD." The power for spiritual freedom is the word of God. The thing which makes you free is the word of God because the word of God reveals Jesus Christ to you, and if you have the Son, you shall be free indeed. If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. Where do you find the Son? You find him in the word of the living God. But here we see it was the word of the Lord that actually made Cyrus give the edict and it was the word of the Lord by Jeremiah, he says.

In fact, you find this in Jeremiah, turn over toward the prophets past Isaiah, you find Jeremiah 25, this was prophesied around 600, maybe 610 actually BC, this part of it. Jeremiah ministered from 625 to about 580. I remember I mentioned last time there were three parts of the Babylonian captivity. 606 was the first time Nebuchadnezzar came and sort of sacked Jerusalem and he took some captives with him, Daniel and his friends went. 597, nine years later, he came back. There was a rebellion among the Jews, they didn't continue paying their tribute, they looked to the Egyptians to be their allies and Nebuchadnezzar comes back and he slaps down Israel again, I mean Judah again. This time he takes Ezekiel and more captives. And then in 586, another rebellious king, Zedekiah, calls out the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar, so he comes back and this time he lays waste the whole city including the temple.

So there are three installments. All the while now, think about if you're in Judah and you see this coming and you're hoping it's not going to come and you have prophets speaking to you, you have Jeremiah the prophet and you have another number of false prophets. Now you don't know they are false prophets at that time, of course, you just hear a guy saying, "Thus says the Lord." And a guy named Hananiah, for instance. Jeremiah is

prophesying, Hananiah is prophesying. Jeremiah is saying this, this is Jeremiah's message. Jeremiah is not the Joel Osteen of his day. He's not saying how you can have a wonderful life, you know, your best life now. No, he's not, that's not his message at all. His message is, "Repent or you will experience judgment. Repent now before it's too late. God is sending the Babylonians and they are going to wreck this place." Hananiah is saying, and other false prophets are saying, "Peace, peace. The Lord is on your side. God wants you to have your best life now."

You could see that it would be easy to pick which prophet would be most popular. Jeremiah was not popular. In fact, when you read the book of Jeremiah, what you see is they are continually threatening him with death. He'll give a prophecy and they're like, "Kill him! Put him to death right now!" But the Lord doesn't let him get put to death but, I mean, it looks kind of rough a few times. He's thrown into prison, he's thrown into a cistern. In fact, one time the Lord tells him, "Put a yoke on your neck," you know, a wooden yoke that you would yoke oxen with, "Put a yoke on your neck and walk throughout Jerusalem and prophesy, 'Thus says the Lord, Nebuchadnezzar is on his way and he's going to destroy you unless you repent.'" He's got this thing, he's going around, he's giving that message. Hananiah comes out and says, "No, thus says the Lord, God is gonna break your yoke," and he takes that yoke off of Jeremiah's neck and he breaks it on the ground, and this false prophet, of course, the people, remember, don't know who's the right prophet, right? So he breaks it on the ground and he says, "In two years, God will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar." This is between those three incursions. You know, the first one has already come in and exacted tribute and he's saying now the Lord is going to break the yoke. And the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and he goes to Hananiah and he says, "Because you have presumed to speak for the Lord and God did not send you, you will die this year," and the text, that chapter I think it's chapter 28, anyway, the word of the Lord comes true, exactly what happened, the man dies, which brings up one of the ways that you know of the prophet of God is that when the prophet of God speaks in the Old Testament, he says something is going to happen, if it doesn't happen, God didn't send him. If it does happen, God sent him. You may not like his message but his word came true.

So the people in the captivity though they at first, many of them, the old guys would have hated when Jeremiah came around. "Oh no, it's that guy, the doom and gloom guy." But maybe now they are 75 or 80 years old. You know, if they went over in the 586 incursion, it's been 50 years since they heard Jeremiah preach, but they've seen everything he said come true and they revere him as a prophet and they know Hananiah was a false prophet and then all the other guys saying, "Peace, peace," were false prophets, but Jeremiah is a true prophet of God. This is how the Bible has always been recognized as Scripture. Let me just throw that out here. There's a lot of nonsense out in the culture about, "Hey, how do you know which books of the Old Testament are really in the Old Testament? How do you know which books in the New Testament are really in the New Testament?" And there are these lies of the devil that are dominating the day in many ways. "The da Vinci Code," stuff like that, the book that was based on this kind of foolish thinking, the idea that the people of God didn't know what the word of God was. No, the people of God have always known what the word of God is and it's essentially

clear in this way: God gave five books to Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, and before Moses dies he gives Deuteronomy, in Deuteronomy 18 he says, "Listen, you're going to have people, God's gonna raise up more prophets for you," and he tells him, "How can you recognize a prophet of God?" And he says in verses 15 to 18 of Deuteronomy 18, "He will claim to speak with authority and his word will be consistent," there will be consistency, "He won't tell you to go after other gods and his word will be accurate," accuracy. Authority, consistency and accuracy. Everything he says will come true and if it doesn't come true, don't be afraid of him, in other words, kill him. If he claims to speak for God and he's not speaking for God, that's a death sentence. God is very serious about his word.

So what happened was Moses gives them the tools they need to test the next prophets and so when Joshua ministers and he says, "Thus says the Lord," and it comes true, what do they know? He's a prophet. When he writes a book, what did they do? They add it to their Canon. That's how the Canon grew, it grew by accretion one book at a time, and they weren't sitting around saying, "Oh, I wish we just knew," and waiting on church councils that happened hundreds of centuries and centuries later. No, the faithful always knew what the word of God was. The same thing happens in the New Testament. Now it was a little more complicated in the New Testament because they are spread out and you've got the Philippians in Philippi receive Philippians, and the Corinthians receive Corinthians obviously, Colossians, etc., but they get transferred around and what are they always looking? They are doing the test, the same three tests: does this have the ring of authority; is it consistent; and is it accurate? And they were looking for apostolic authorship. So they knew what the New Testament was immediately too. There was no hopeless sea of subjectivity. God defends his word and he made his word clear.

So I say that because look in Nehemiah, I mean in Ezra 1, they knew that Jeremiah was the word of God and this is only 40 years after Jeremiah has died. They weren't waiting on the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. to tell them that Jeremiah was the prophet of God and that they should listen to his word. Daniel 9:2, Daniel was reading the scroll of Jeremiah. Why? Because it's the word of God. He was reading it about a couple of years before this.

So the word of God is sure. We can count on it and the word of God is powerful. The fact that Jeremiah said in chapter 25, verses 11 and 12, "This whole land will be a desolation and a horror," this is part of his prophecy, his message of doom and gloom that came true, "This whole land will be a desolation and a horror and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years." Israel and the nations around them, you're all going to be under, it's going to be a horrible place to be. Verse 12, 'Then it will be when seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity in the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make an everlasting desolation.'" Then I'm going to punish Babylon and I'm going to end the exile. He says the same thing in chapter 29, verse 10, repeats this promise, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.'" This is the context of that verse that is so often quoted, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for

welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me and I will listen to you. You will see Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD." It's the word of God, the very fact that God prophesied that, the way that Ezra, the book of Ezra presents this is the reason Cyrus did what he did was God stirred him up by the power of his word. The fact that God had spoken it meant it could not but happen. The word of the Lord dwells forever.

So the power for spiritual freedom is in the word of God. How do you get saved? You get saved when the word of God comes into your life. We read earlier from 1 Peter 1, Peter says, "Hey, we were born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable seed of the living and abiding word of God." That's how you're born again, the word of God. So what sets you free is the word of God. God says, "You shall be free and nothing can stop you from being free." God says, "If you place your faith in Jesus you will be free, nothing can stop you from being free." His word makes it happen and his word continues to be the power for spiritual freedom after you come to faith. How do you get free more and more and more in your life? Jesus said, "Sanctify them in Your word, Your word is truth." Sanctify, being set apart, being made holy. How does a Christian grow in grace? That's sanctification. How does that happen? You're in the word.

So you and I need liberty, you need spiritual freedom, where do you go? There is one place to go, it's to Jesus who is found in the word. You go to the word. You can't find Jesus in reading some books about people who think they have heard from him. You find Jesus and what Jesus says in the word of God, the 66 books of the Bible. That's the only place you find Jesus. You see, God is very serious about finding it in one place and so we go to the word of God and we are set free. That's where true spiritual freedom comes, it comes from the word of God. Jesus said, "If you continue in My word," John 8:31 and 32, "If you continue in My word, then truly are you My disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will," what? "Will make you free." It's the word of the living God, the word of Christ.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for giving us Your revelation and Your word. We pray that You would help us to be people of Your book, that we would live in it, abide in it even as we read earlier from 1 Peter 2, that we would be like newborn babes earnestly desiring the sincere milk of the word that we may grow thereby. For those that are not born again here, Lord, may they hear the word of God today and respond to it in repentance and faith. May You grant them new life through Your word and may You say to them live truly even today. Father, help us all to give You glory for the great things that You have done in Jesus Christ, and we pray in His name. Amen.