

God Moves the Heart

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Ezra 1, if you would please turn there.

“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,

“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. 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.

“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. 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.

“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. 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.”

May the Lord bless this the reading of his holy, infallible and inspired word. You may be seated.

The website, Sermon Audio, which hosts some of our sermons has over 90,000 sermons that you can easily access with just a few mouse clicks. It's a tremendous resource. I would encourage you to visit that site if you have not done so, not just to hear some of my sermons that are out there but there are many other good sermons available. Only 184 sermons on their website come from the book of Ezra and so while this book is certainly not completely ignored today in the life of the church, it's also not one of the most well-known or studied books in the life of the church and so I've chosen this morning to begin a series that will take us through the book of Ezra. This study will take most of this summer and I have chosen the book of Ezra for at least four main reasons. First, as far as I remember, I don't think that our church has ever studied this book or preached through it, at least not that I can remember. Secondly, Ezra is not a long book and so our study will not take years but rather months. As a beginning preacher, I think this is better than embarking on a study that will take a great deal of time. Third, after spending a number of weeks, after a number of messages in the New Testament, I thought it would be good again that we focus our attention to the Old Testament. We, of course, do realize that 75% or so of the Bible is made up of the Old Testament and so certainly we should spend much time in the Old even as we do the New. Fourth, one of the main themes in the book of Ezra is that of rebuilding, that of starting over, that of not being discouraged with trials and difficulties, not being discouraged with the days of small things. So, given the recent history of this church, I felt that this would be an encouraging and appropriate book for us to consider.

I don't feel that it's extremely valuable to begin with a long or exhaustive introduction to the book of Ezra. We will note comments that are helpful that don't come directly from the text as we continue our studies, but I thought a few introductory comments will be helpful as we begin our search in this book. First, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were most likely originally one book in the Old Testament. The Jewish Scribes, the Masoretes, treated the book as one and structurally, the two books also fit together as one. The third century church father, Origen, was most likely the first one to divide the books into two, that of Ezra and Nehemiah, and this tradition has continued in the Latin version, the Vulgate and it continues today in our English Bibles. So, the books are one. They can be, of course, studied separately but it's also helpful to consider them as one single book and think of the overarching theme that would run through both books.

The author of Ezra is most likely, I believe, Ezra, the Scribe, who I believe, also authored the book of Nehemiah and possibly the book of Chronicles. The commentators are not in full agreement on these issues. It's also important to note that Ezra played a most important role in canonizing and putting together the Old Testament Scriptures and we'll look more at that in future weeks. But Ezra was not used by God just in the rebuilding, you might say, of the temple and the rebuilding of the walls but he played a most important role as the Scriptures were formalized and put together the Old Testament Scriptures.

Third, the chronology of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not easy to understand. There are a number of different ideas in terms of when all the events of these two books happened, but the traditional view is that the first part of Ezra, that would be chapters 1-6, cover a time span of about 20 years, from about 538 BC to about 515 BC. The story of Ezra actually begins not until chapter 7 and so chapters 7-10 of Ezra start the story about another 57 years later. Then about another 13 years later, in 445 BC, would start the work of Nehemiah who was also accompanied by Ezra. As I say, there are other views for these things; I don't think it's that profitable to labor these points this morning or even in future weeks but we will perhaps note some of these details in our future studies.

This morning, though, I would like to emphasize from chapter 1 the theme of the Lord moving the heart. It is the Lord that is the primary character in this first chapter and so we'll see this morning in verses 1-4, the Lord moves the heart of Cyrus. And then secondly, we'll see that the Lord moves the heart of his people in verses 5-6. Then again, we'll see that the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus in verses 7-11.

We know that while the empire of Babylon was still boasting of its power and glory, that the Lord was raising up a man. The Lord was raising up an empire that was still small and unknown and this empire, the Medo-Persian empire, this man, Cyrus, would, of course, come to change the entire history of God's people. And even before Babylon would boast of its power, God was boasting 100 years earlier that he would do this incredible work, that God would raise up a shepherd named Cyrus. There is a beautiful prophecy coming from Isaiah 45 and the end of chapter 44 where God boasted of his work that he would do through Cyrus. I'll read just a portion coming from the end of chapter 44 and up through the first six verses of chapter 45. We read,

“28 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.””

“1 Thus says the Lord to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held - To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut: 2 ‘I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the Lord, Who call you by your name, Am the God of Israel. 4 For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. 5 I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

These words spoken well over 100 years before God would raise up this rather insignificant vassal of the king of Medes. This one who came from these nomadic tribes

in the area of present day Iran, who would then later rebel against the king of Medes, who would then later unite the tribes of the Medes and Persians into a formidable power and people. And as the text in Isaiah 45 says that God would take him by the hand, that God would break down the gates and, indeed, that's what we see happening in the life of Cyrus as he was then able to conquer the powerful Midians, as he was then next able to move into India with great success. Although the Babylonian Empire was continuing to boast of their power, the presence of Cyrus grew even into their empire.

So, the Babylonians still thought they were safe; they had built this massive wall. They thought that they could outlast any army that attempted to siege them because they would have more food inside their precious city than any army could bring with them and yet we know the story from Daniel 5, that while king Belshazzar was blaspheming God by celebrating an orgy using the vessels taken from the temple, that the finger of a man's hand appeared and wrote a message of judgment on the wall that God had numbered the kingdom of the Babylonians and finished it, that Belshazzar had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, that the mighty Babylonian kingdom would, that night, be divided, given to the Medes and Persians and that very night Belshazzar was slain. So, basically the mighty empire of Babylon fell with a very little fight as the armies of Cyrus were able to invade the city of Babylon. And that very night, as the text notes, Belshazzar was slain.

The first word in the book of Ezra is the word "and." So, the start of Ezra, you might say, is the rest of the story. The rest of the story of God's people: their deliverance, the rebuilding of their precious temple. The first year also mentioned in verse 1 is not the first year of Cyrus but, rather, the first year in which Cyrus now ruled over the mighty Babylonian Empire. This first year, at least traditionally, dated to about the year 538 BC. Think for a moment about the meaning or the significance of that date. Think still of the long history that still remained for God's people about 500 years earlier with the great monarchy of Israel. Yet now, in about the year 538, God was going to do something even greater. Even greater than Israel's previous history. Even greater than the exodus. And yet, this work would still occupy a long period of time, another 538 years or so before the coming of Christ. And so we see that from an outward perspective, things seemed so long. God's plans are so much greater than our plans; they work at a much different time scale, so often, than our own time plans. Even though these days from an outward perspective were not very glorious, they were not the greatest days of Israel from an outward perspective and yet the Lord said these would be even greater days. The work that God was doing would even make the people of God forget their previous deliverances.

Verse 1 also mentions "the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah." This prophetic word issued by Jeremiah in chapter 29, we've noted this verse earlier, where the Lord says, "After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good work toward you and cause you to return to this place." Now, that expression "the seventy years" has troubled some commentators for Israel was not in Babylon for a full seventy years and yet we read in Daniel 9 that Daniel understood what this meant, that Daniel understood as he read Jeremiah, perhaps even this specific verse, that Daniel knew

that the captivity was also coming to an end. We read in Daniel 9 the response of Daniel, now an old man, probably in his 80s, and his response was to fast, to pray, to humble himself before God, to confess before God his own sin and the sin of Israel. So, even though Daniel is not mentioned in verse 1 of Ezra 1, I believe that Daniel plays a role in this for Daniel would have had great influence in the Persian Empire. We read in Daniel 6 that Daniel was the second most important person in the entire Persian kingdom, that he was head over all the other 120 governors and so I don't think we should discount the influence that Daniel may have had even in this first verse of Ezra, chapter 1. Daniel, perhaps encouraging King Cyrus who certainly was fulfilling the word of God. He was fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah and he had also, we should perhaps believe that Daniel played an important role here in Ezra, chapter 1.

But the most important expression here in verse 1 is "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia." This word can also mean "to awaken." The Lord awakened the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. The same expression is used also in Jeremiah 51 where the Lord stirred up Cyrus to destroy Babylon. The Lord stirred up Cyrus to bring vengeance on Babylon for the destruction of the temple but now the Lord stirs up the spirit of Cyrus the king of Persia. I think we find here great hope even in our own day. We look at the wicked politicians all around us and we're not filled with much hope, are we? And yet our only hope is that the Lord may also stir their hearts.

Cyrus was not a Christian, we do not believe. In fact, I'll later note that he appears to be a pagan. He worshiped false gods and yet the Lord used him. The Lord held him by the hand. The Lord called him even his anointed and so we should remember and I think we do remember as a church, that God uses even the wicked to accomplish his purposes. That is why I believe we should continue in our prayers and be strengthened in our prayers for our wicked politicians. Not expecting that the Lord will perhaps do the same great work in our own day, but pray that the Lord would use even our wicked governor, our wicked senators from Illinois, to accomplish his purposes, that the Lord might stir their hearts to work out his purposes for his people. So, let us not be filled with discouragement but let us continue to hope and pray that the Lord might do the same great work.

We read also then in verse 1, that Cyrus "made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing." Those are important words; they'll come later in the story of Ezra in chapter 6. So, Cyrus sends out a proclamation. Messengers would have been sent through all the empire proclaiming these great words. And notice the words, again, that Cyrus proclaimed throughout his kingdom, "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. 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." And so, although Cyrus is not a worshiper of Yahweh, he is not a worshiper of the true God, he is used, you might say, to bring a type of gospel message. Cyrus sends out this proclamation throughout all the empire proclaiming that it is the Lord, Israel's God, that is the true God of heaven.

Now, I mentioned that Cyrus, most likely, is a pagan. The British Museum in London has in its vast collection an important archeological piece from this time period. It's called "The Cyrus Cylinder" and it's a piece of clay, a clay cylinder about nine inches in height, several inches probably in diameter or circumference. It contains in cuneiform the following inscription which has been translated. It reads, speaking of Cyrus: "I returned to these sacred cities, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their habitations. May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nabu for a long life for me, to Marduk my lord, may they say this, 'Cyrus the King who worships you and Cambyses his son.'"

So, there is no doubt that Cyrus was a pagan king, perhaps later converted we know not and yet God used this mighty king to spread throughout his empire, as I say, a type of gospel message, a proclamation that said it was Israel's God who was the true Lord. And so we see, though, that Israel was not faithful in being a light so God raised up pagan kings to be that witness, to be that testimony.

We read in verse 2 that Cyrus said that God had commanded him "to build Him a house at Jerusalem." That's really amazing language. The language here reflects one of the most important themes in the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament you find this theme where there is this great victory followed by the building of a house. Remember when Israel came out of Egypt, that most of the book of Exodus now focuses then on their building of a house, the tabernacle. The highlight of the book of Exodus is not so much the exodus but, rather, the presence of God filling the tabernacle. We remember that David after his great military victories also wanted to build a house, a greater house for God. We read about that in 2 Samuel 7. And yet, God told David, "You will not build me a house but I will build you a house." And so, we have here now a pagan king given these great military victories by God, that this pagan king will also be used now to build a house for God.

God used, you might say, all these stories, these pictures, this theme of building of a house as a shadow, as types for the even greater work that Christ would do for we know that after Christ's victory on the cross, that the New Testament also speaks of Christ building a house. That Christ builds his temple, his body, the church, through now the working of the Holy Spirit. So we have here this important theme in the book of Ezra, the theme of building a house.

Verse 4 also contains two additional important expressions. First we find in verse 4, the expression "whoever is left" or "remaineth" as used in the King James version. This is the Hebrew word that is often translated as "remnant." It's an important word if you do a word study on that. The use of the word "remnant" there is a word of hope for Isaiah had earlier again, prophesied that a remnant would escape, that a remnant would return, that a remnant would actually be brought from all the nations and that God would make a highway for this remnant who were left in Assyria and that they would experience, then,

another exodus so Cyrus says, whoever is a part of that remnant. And as this proclamation would have spread throughout the empire, the people of God would have recognized the significance of that word. It would have been a word of hope, a word reminding them that God had made these promises, that God was now fulfilling his word.

The second expression there in verse 4 also ties-in with the theme of exodus: those who were going to return were to ask their neighbors. They were to ask, as it says in verse 4, “the men of his place,” and they were to ask them for “silver and gold,” for “goods and livestock, along with freewill offerings,” that is, offerings specifically to be used for the temple. Again, this is the theme of Exodus for if you remember the story of the exodus, God’s people, the children of Israel, were also to ask their neighbors for silver and for gold. We read in Exodus 12:35-36, “Now the children of Israel had done according to the word of Moses, and they had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing. And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.”

This is, in a similar way, what is happening here in Ezra. God also moved in the hearts of the people around them so that they would be willing to give, that they would be willing to give silver and gold and animals and things specifically for the temple. And so we have here God doing an even greater work than that of the exodus. As Proverbs 13:22 says, “The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.” What a precious promise that is: all the wealth that the Lord gives to the wicked is to be used, truly, for that of building his kingdom. So, let us not fret even in our own day. We have seen that in the life of this church, have we not? That the Lord has used even the wealth of a sinner, the wealth of this local public school system to bless us with this building, to give us other blessings that we have received.

What we have here, then, in verses 5-6, I believe the central verses, then, of this chapter, for we read just as God moved the spirit of Cyrus, so God then moved the spirits of his people. God moved the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah, of Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, these who had been taken earlier in the captivity, these faithful who remained among Israel, God also then moved in their hearts.

Next week we’ll look from chapter 2 that this was a small group of people. It was only about 50,000 people that were brought back in this first return. Compare that to the nearly several million that came out of Egypt. This was a small return. The Lord moved their hearts and, apparently in the Lord’s sovereign work, this was only a small number. Again, we don’t know exactly how many were left in Babylon. I mentioned in an earlier sermon that one estimate is that only one out of seven Jews returned from Babylon and if you think about it, it’s not really a big surprise why so few would want to return. Imagine if you had to take your family and walk 800-1,000 miles with all that you had, carrying them with you, perhaps, with a few animals that could transport some of your stuff. It meant leaving what was a very modern city at the time, a very comfortable way of living by the rivers of Babylon. Returning to a city that had now for over 50 years been desolate, left destroyed, burned to the ground.

So you can understand why so few wanted to return. It meant leaving convenience for inconvenience. It meant leaving comfort for discomfort. Yet the Lord moved on the hearts of his chosen ones. Though they were a small number, they were willing to endure what would have been a difficult journey, probably several months by foot. Yet those whose hearts are moved by God, will do whatever God requires. These few were those who had sworn to never forget Jerusalem. They were those who were returning not just to rebuild their cities and homes but they were returning so that the true worship of God could be established. They were returning so that the glory of God would again be known at his temple.

We note, then, from verse 6, that this small group though was encouraged. They were encouraged then with articles of silver, articles of gold, encouraged with livestock. They were encouraged with precious things; they were encouraged then with specific gifts to be used for the building of the temple. Again, you might say the theme of Exodus is again repeated here.

Why was it that God moved in these hearts? Well, we know it is his sovereign work. It is the Lord who sovereignly moves in the hearts of his people and yet the Lord also calls us, though, to take responsibility. Yes, it is the sovereign work of God in salvation and in all our lives and yet the Lord calls us to have tender hearts. The Lord calls us to hear his voice. Those that remained could not say, “Well, the Lord didn’t make my heart move. I’m without excuse.” For so often we do in our own sin resist what we know the Lord wants us to do, do we not?

So this morning, I would like us to consider: what is it that the Lord would have us do specifically? Where is it that the Lord is also moving in our own hearts? Where is it that we see that the Lord is specifically calling us, perhaps in a new area of service? What new thing the Lord might work in our own families? Where is the Lord calling you, perhaps to see your sin in a special way? To turn in repentance? So, let us ask that the Lord would search our hearts, that the Lord would also move our hearts so that we would be faithful in his service for it is so easy to be lured by the convenience, the comfort of life. It is so much more difficult, we might say, to follow the Lord as we should than to just put on an outward profession.

We see, then, in the last verses of chapter 1 that the Lord, again, is moving in the heart of Cyrus. We see that Cyrus brings out the articles from the house of the Lord. You know, Cyrus could have easily have taken this gold and silver; he could have had it melted down. He could have used this to glorify his kingdom and yet we see that Cyrus, though, in obedience to a God, perhaps that he did not know personally and yet in obedience, he returns these articles. They were not his in the first place and yet he does humble himself. He takes these vessels, these items which had been stolen, some of them used, as I said earlier, in a drunken orgy, in worship of false gods, and yet we see them now being restored for their rightful use.

We also see, secondly, in these final verses, that God is bringing not just restoration to his people and bringing them out of captivity, but he’s also, then, restoring the house of the

Lord. The importance is not just the people returning but the importance is that all these items that were stolen are also being brought together. And I think we see, third, from these verses that God is concerned not only with just the bigger picture but God is concerned for these tiny details we might call them. Note again the very specific listing: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, another four hundred and ten silver basins, one thousand other articles. One problem that we have in fully understanding is that these words are only used once in the Old Testament. Perhaps these are words or Persian loan words. We don't know exactly what these basins and platters would have been used for. Somehow they were part of the temple and its service. And if you are good at arithmetic and perhaps you noticed this, you might have noticed that the total number of items mentioned in verses 9 and 10 add up to 2,499 and yet verse 11 lists 5,400 articles of gold and silver being returned. Why is there a difference we might ask? Well, no one knows the exact reason but in the little bit of research that I did do on this, I think the one that makes the most sense is that the listing in verses 9 and 10 is only a part of the listing and that verse 11, then, here is, you might say, the total listing. At least there are other examples of that in the ancient world at that time. We certainly do not believe that God's people couldn't count or do the arithmetic. Somehow there is this difference and I think the most likely reason is that this is a part of the listing.

Again, more importantly, consider that how the Lord cared for his people in these specific ways, that each of these items of gold and silver, each of these precious items being returned was a sign of the Lord's sovereign care. They each, you might say, were witnesses that the Lord, indeed, was good, that the Lord had moved the heart of Cyrus, that all these important things, then, were being returned. We read in Luke 12:6-7 the words of Jesus, "Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." God is concerned, you might say, with the smallest of details.

So, each of these details that is returned is, again, a sign of God's care, a sign of God's providence and so let us consider, again, as a church, let us consider again as families, all the testimonies of the Lord's goodness. You know, I think it is good that we try to be specific in our prayers of thanksgiving. It's good rather than just praying a general prayer, "Lord, thank you for everything you've given me," to specifically try to recount all the specific blessings that the Lord gives to us. Truly, if we did that more, we would consider how the Lord does watch over us, how the Lord has given us so many signs of his care, so many testimonies of his love for us. So, let us seek to be a thankful and a specifically thankful people as we recount all the Lord's gifts and blessings to us.

Today as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we also remember that the Lord has brought us out of exile. That the Lord has brought us out of our rebellion. That the Lord has moved our hearts. That the Lord has brought us sovereignly, in his mercy, in his grace, to salvation and faith in Jesus Christ. We read from 1 Peter 2:4-6 the words of Peter who writes, "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy

priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.’”

The Lord then calls us now to his table to remember that we are being built up together to be a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood so that we may then, offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ and all, then, who believe on him, have that precious promise. They will by no means be put to shame.

Let us then close in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this word from Ezra chapter 1, the reminder, the encouragement that it is today for us as a people. Lord, how we thank you that through your sovereign work you are bringing your true church, your true temple together from every tongue, tribe and nation. Continue that perfect work we pray, in the life of this church. And now, Lord, be with us in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper.