

Free Indeed Part 2

Ezra-Nehemiah

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I want to take a moment just to say a word also about Father's Day and recognize our fathers and pray for them before we release the children. It's a blessing to have a godly father; it's a blessing to have a father, period--but especially to have one who loves the Lord, and I'm so grateful for my Dad, and I'm grateful for Patti's Dad who loved the Lord. And what a joy it is to serve God today with my father as an elder in the church, so it's certainly a wonderful blessing. And God has given us fathers to point us to him.

As Ted was mentioning earlier, you know couple of passages, couple of my favorite verses from Psalm 103, verses 13 and 14, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he himself knows our frame, he is mindful that we are but dust." The same way that a father looks at his child with compassion, he says, "Use that as a window to see how God looks at you in Christ." How awesome that is. And another verse shows how God gave the family to show us what a relationship with him is going to be like. Wasn't an afterthought--he does nothing accidentally; he created the family to show us his purpose in bringing people to himself in the relationship of a father and sons and daughters. Galatians chapter 4 says that, "He sent his Spirit into our hearts crying, 'Abba, Father,'" literally, "Papa, Daddy," that when the Spirit comes into your heart, that's his purpose--it's to make you look to God, the one who is holy, and the one who has existed from eternity past to eternity future, all powerful, all present. This God can be your father, and that's the glory of the Gospel, and that's the high calling that we have as fathers, to try to, by his grace, reflect his character. So I'll take a moment and pray for the Fathers that are here. If you're a father would you please stand and remain standing. Amen, praise God. Let's lift these men up to the Lord right now.

Our Father, how grateful we are that you have made us your children through Jesus Christ. And you have given us the incredible unspeakable privilege of addressing you, the living God, as Father. Lord, we thank you that you have given us each of these men who are fathers, and have children, and we pray that you would bless them richly, Lord, that you would help them all to look to you in true and living faith, and help us all become more like you, to model out your character more and more, to have true love for our children, to point them, not to ourselves, but to you. May your blessing be upon each family; those who are fathers of young children, may your blessing be upon them as they

train up their children in the way that they should go. For those that have adult children, may you continue to use the influence of godly fathers in the lives of adult children and grandchildren. And may in every way, may you receive all the praise and glory, but may you equip us to be pleasing to you. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Please be seated. Children you can be dismissed to your classes now. May the Lord bless you and help you grow in your understanding of his grace.

And would you please turn with me in your Bibles to the first chapter of Ezra. Ezra, right after First and Second Chronicles you find the book of Ezra, way before Psalms, and Job, Psalms, the Prophets, it's back at the end of the historical books. We're going to continue our exposition of this book, the Old Testament book of Ezra. Actually, we're going to exposit, Lord willing, Ezra/Nehemiah, those two books that we believe originally were one book in the Hebrew Bible, and so we're going to be looking at those over the next months, Lord willing, and looking at how God's dealings with his people in the past speak to us today.

The Bible says, "All Scripture is profitable, all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable," so every passage is profitable to the soul of the believer, and so we want to look and see how this Old Testament book speaks to our lives. We entitled the message, continuing a message I began last week called "Free Indeed." Free Indeed, Ezra Chapter 1, verses 1 to 11, the title is "Free Indeed," borrowing that phrase from Jesus when he said in John Chapter 8, "If the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed." Because what we're going to see in this passage is how the people of God in that day, the people of Israel who had been exiled to Babylon for seventy years were now being released, set free to go back to the land of Israel. They were experiencing freedom and so what was their freedom about. And we'll see that there is a wonderful analogy between their freedom and the freedom of those who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. So that we are free indeed. And we're going to look this morning at this passage and see how it speaks to our lives.

Let's read verses 1 to 11 of Ezra Chapter 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: "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. 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. 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.'" 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. 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. 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; 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. Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles. 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 ask that you know would bless the word of the living God would become alive in our hearts by your Spirit. We pray that you would open our eyes, open our hearts, and lead to us to deeper understanding and to true faith, we pray in Christ’s name, Amen.”

So we’re looking at the return of the people from exile in Babylon and a journey of about between 800-1,000 miles. They’d been there long enough that the people who were returning, few of them were ever in Israel in the first place. It’s been seventy years; some of them were exiled 70 years before, some 60, some 50. So some of those who had been exiled maybe 50 years are able to make the journey back. Maybe they were in their teens, and they were going back as old men and old women. But most of them had never been there. And so they’re going back because God has stirred their hearts, and they’re going back because they’ve been set free and this freedom has much to teach us.

I want to look, organize our thoughts this morning, under two points. And the first point I think we should see that the text makes clear and that speaks to us is the purpose of their freedom. First point, the purpose of their freedom.

Observe the purpose that God set them free. What we see in the passage, this is made very clear, emphatically clear, the purpose that they were set free was to build the house of the Lord. Now, it’s straightforward but has tremendous implications. And let’s see how clear this is made in the passage. It’s repeated basically twice in verses 3 and 5, this is in the proclamation of Cyrus, in essentially their emancipation proclamation from Cyrus, King of Persia, which is recorded in verses 2 through 4. He says in verse 3, “Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, let him go up to Jerusalem.” So the first time they’ve been allowed now to leave the land of their sojourning, the land of exile, they’re now allowed to go up to Jerusalem. But look at the purpose for which they are sent back to the land. By the decree of the King, he says, “Let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord.” They’re sent home to rebuild the house of the Lord. And this is repeated in verse 5, and now the

narrative picks up again, that the decree was recorded for us word for word, verses 2 to 4, of Cyrus. And now the narrative picks up and this is what happened, basically, after the decree is issued, verse 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."

So they're going to rebuild the house. I mean, you think about that, the purpose of their freedom was not first to reinhabit Jerusalem; the purpose of their freedom was not first to spread out and fill Judah; it was not to work the land, farm the land, to raise flocks; it was not to rebuild their homes; it was not to establish families--that was not the first purpose of their freedom. The purpose of their freedom was to build God's house. That's why they're released. Above all these important things they were all going to have to do yet, it is a purpose to reinhabit Jerusalem, to reinhabit the cities of Judah, to work the land. Yes, that's important, to till the soil again to establish crops, to raise flocks, to rebuild homes, to build families--yes, all of those things are very important--but one thing comes above and before all that, and that's building God's house for these people. That was the command. The purpose of their freedom was to build God's house.

What did that mean? That this doesn't apply to us in the--I'm not going to say the purpose of the church is to build the building we've been talking about building, no that's not it at all--that is not the application of this passage. The purpose for them was to build, in that point in time, was to build a building. Why? Because that building was the one place that true worship could happen. At that point in redemptive history, the way God was revealing himself slowly over time to his people and through his people to us, was that you had to have a temple to worship at. There had to be an altar to offer sacrifices. There had to be a house where incense would be offered. There had to be priests who were ministering in the holy place. Inside the temple walls, and then once a year, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies, this all had to happen for the people of God to really experience the presence of God again. And the purpose that they're set free was to go and recreate that place--to rebuild God's house so that sacrifices will again be offered, incense will again be burned, prayer will be uttered, but all of that is about the presence of God being experienced. Worship in his presence.

The way that the Lord had ordained things so that the one place you could meet God at that point in time was the temple in Jerusalem. That was the one place you could offer sacrifices, the one place you could burn incense, that's the one place that you can truly pray and be in his presence. Now we shared previous weeks that that was part of God teaching us, prattling with us, baby-talking with us to teach us that eventually he was going to reveal his Son as the fulfillment of the temple. And what is that saying? There is one place that sinners meet God and that is through the temple Jesus Christ--his flesh, shed his blood to bring us to God. There's no other place that you can meet God. Jesus Christ and Christ alone. Well at their point in history though Jesus had not yet been revealed and so God was still teaching us through the rebuilding of the temple this is the one place and so to tell them to go back and do that was to say, "What's above everything else, what's before your taking care of your family, what's before your vocation, what's

before everything else is worship.” That’s what’s primary. That’s what men were created to do. That’s what women were created to do. We were created to worship.

Now, think about this. If you’re a Christian, one of the images that the Lord picks up on from all of that teaching in the Old Testament, is you have been redeemed. You have been purchased back with a price--the blood of Christ has been paid to redeem you from slavery. You’ve been set free from bondage, released from bondage. What is the purpose--why did God release you and me from bondage? Was it so that we could have our best life? So that we could have ultimate fulfillment now? Is that why he released us? So that we could build everything we want, to make everything work the way we want? Is that why God released us? No. According to this, God released you from bondage so that you could build his house; so that you could make his presence the very center of your life; so that you could make worship the central, main thing of everything. You were set free from the dominion of sin, where you were separated from God by your sins. And you were brought near through the blood of Christ so that you can worship him again.

In fact, let’s look at this. The New Testament picks this up so wonderfully. Ephesians 2. Think about the imagery the apostle uses here in Ephesians 2 and think about how it resonates. Think about--remember Israel, the people of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, have been taken captive, bondage a thousand miles away from the presence of God. They’re in a strange land, far removed, far away from the presence of God and then they’re released to go back. Listen to these words that Paul says in speaking about converted sinners, Gentiles who now have come to faith after Christ has been revealed through the Gospel. Ephesians 2 verse 11, “Therefore remember that you formerly, the Gentiles in the flesh, who were called Uncircumcision by the so-called Circumcision, which is performed in flesh by human hands, remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace.” Now he talks about the glory of the Gospel, how he abolished in his flesh the enmity, he took away our sins by being punished for our wickedness. He took all of the wrath of God in himself, for everyone who’d ever believe, so that every sin, past present and future, of every believer has been borne by Christ. And he’s taken it out of the way, and therefore we who were far away have been brought near to the place of God’s presence.

Look how he carries the imagery forward. In the apostle Paul’s mind, where does he go next? Look at verse 19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” He says, “Listen, you’ve been brought from far away to the presence of God and you are the temple. You are the building. You are blocks in the building.” Earlier Jess read from 1 Peter chapter 2, verses 1-12. In that passage the apostle Peter was saying essentially the same thing. He reminds them, he says, “Look, you were delivered from the domain of darkness, translated to the kingdom of God’s Son.” He actually, sorry I’m bringing

Colossians 1:13 into it as well, but he says, “You formerly were not the people of God, now you are the people of God, you’ve been rescued from darkness and delivered into...” Aw, come on. I’m sorry. Let’s just turn to it. 1 Peter chapter 2. Verse 9, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” this is 1 Peter 2:9; he’s speaking to redeemed believers. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness, into his marvelous light.” Your purpose is to proclaim the excellency of him who called you out of darkness, out of being a stranger, out of being without hope, out of being far away from God; now you’re brought into his marvelous light, into his presence, what is your purpose? To proclaim his excellency, to worship and to glorify him. And he goes on to say, in verse 10, “For you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God. You had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy,” and that comes right after he talks about in verses 4 and 5, we’re being, we’re living stones, being built up into a spiritual house, to offer up sacrifices to God. Why did he bring us to himself? So that we could worship him. That is our reason for living. That is the reason we were redeemed--to build God’s house--the same way it was for them. They were released from their exile and allowed to go back to the place of God’s presence to build his house. Now what does this mean for us? Think of three things in this purpose of their freedom, build God’s house, and here’s some application points under this first point. The purpose of their freedom, build God’s house.

Build God’s house first of all in your own heart and life. Interesting that the Bible speaks of our bodies in 1 Corinthians chapter 6:19. We’re told that “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who’s in you whom you have from God. And you are not your own.” Your body’s a temple. If you belong to Christ your body has been bought and he goes on to say, “For you were bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body,” in verse 20. He redeemed you to make you his temple, to make you his house. This means that we’re to make our primary purpose in our lives the worship of the living God. We’re to fit our hearts and our lives to be a place of his dwelling among us. This is why we fight sin. This is why we seek to grow in our knowledge of his Word, so that our soul would be his dwelling, that we would commune with the living God. So seeking sanctification isn’t, you don’t try to be more holy so that you feel better about yourself--that’s not the main reason, that’s a byproduct, but that’s not the main reason at all. You try to be more holy so that you can experience more of his presence and be a more worthy place for him to dwell. So build God’s house in your own life, that’s the first application point.

Secondly, build God’s house in the lives of others in the church. You build God’s house by building other Christians. Now what this is saying is, this, what I’m just talking about, is more important than your vocation. It’s far more important than your vocation. It’s far more important than you raising your children, and taking care of them. Now when you should be doing that, you should be hoping to build God’s house in their hearts, but all of those things are secondary--they’re not unimportant, we’re not saying that at all, they’re important--but they’re important as they are connected to the center, which is to make it all about worship. Now if you think of it as like bicycle spokes. The spokes go into the center, and the center is worshiping the living God, and vocation, and family, and relationships. All these other things are spokes that come out from it’s all about worship.

So we build in the lives of others, we encourage, we teach, we admonish, we love, we care for, we spend time with, we make it our purpose to do this, building God's house, that's what's happening on Sunday afternoons at 3:15 at Belmont Village, it's building God's house, and it's worth sacrificing for.

In fact one of the realities was for these people to leave Babylon and go back was an incredibly costly, physically demanding, socially demanding. I mean they had had relationships, they were in some measure in various levels prospering in the land; they weren't living as slaves, they were living as quasi-slaves. They were basically free people as far as their daily activities, but they didn't have the freedom to go back to Israel. They were to stay where they were. They didn't have the freedom and mobility, but they had--and they were operating businesses, they were doing things, they were, from what accounts we have, reasonably successful. So they were leaving homes, they were leaving businesses, they were leaving relationships in communities where they had standing, and they were going back to a wasteland, because their eyes were on the kingdom of God.

So what are we sacrificing to build his house? Are you sacrificing? Is it a priority? Are you giving yourself to this eternal work? Is there anything more important? Could there be anything more important? So we build God's house by building in our own hearts, by building in the lives of other believers in the church, and we do it by building through evangelism. This is why we share with unbelievers, because we're trying to build God's house. It's all about worship. We're trying to see God take people who are dead in their trespasses and sins, enemies of God, and make them his children so that they become worshipers of the living God. It's the best thing that can happen to them, but beyond that it's what brings glory to God. Now, the reality is in the same way it was very difficult for them, it was hard work, it was costly to even begin to go back, and then when they get back, man, it's going to be hard. And I think this is one of the great teachings of this book is, I think their expectations were dashed again and again. The reality, the realism of this book. We would like it to be easy. Building God's house is not easy. Not in your own heart, I mean how hard is it to fight sin? How easy is that?

Man, when you first come to faith you think it's going to be easy because the Lord gives you grace and you come in and maybe you let go of some things that you were doing and you're kind of riding that spiritual high, but the reality of living the Christian life day after day, month after month, year after year, it is a war. It is a marathon. It's not easy. And not only is it a marathon, but it's a marathon where you're running the race and people are attacking you along the way, and that would really be like the ultimate marathon, wouldn't it! You're running and you would have to fight all along the way. You run a mile and you've got to fight somebody and you run a mile and you've got to fight somebody. I don't think I'd like that. I wouldn't even want to run the miles anyway. But count me out on that if I can avoid that right. But you know that's 26.2-0.0, I've seen that sign somewhere on somebody's car--I'm with them. But, the Christian life, making your life God's house, is like that. Running and fighting, running and fighting. Spiritually that's what it is.

Now, praise the Lord, we have his Spirit inside of us. We have the Word, we have his grace. But he has a way, his grace shows up when we need it and we need it because we're continually aware of how overwhelmed we are. How difficult it is. But the purpose of our freedom is to build his house. It is to seek his presence and to build everything and build our lives individually, corporately around him.

Now, the second point, that was the purpose of their freedom--the second point is the promise in their freedom. The purpose of their freedom, the promise in their freedom. And the promise, though it's not explicitly stated, it is emphatic in how clear it is implicitly. I mean the purpose was explicitly stated in the text and repeated. This is the purpose, why I'm setting you free, "Go build his house." The promise is not as explicitly stated, but it's implicitly carried forcefully in the narrative. And the promise is this: "I am with you." That is the promise. God says, "Build my house, that's the purpose, the promise is I am with you in the work. I will be with you in the work." That's the promise. I said it's implicitly clear. When you look back at our passage, you see this in a number of ways. The first is that the Lord has called him to do a work which he has already begun.

Look at 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." The whole reason this is happening is God is at work, first of all, in the heart of Cyrus. So he's inviting them to join him in a work he's already doing, and the same way, he's inviting us to join him in a work he's already doing. He stirred up the heart of Cyrus. In fact, it's interesting, that word means to be awakened, to be aroused, to then be watchful, to be alert--same word is repeated in the passage, in verse 5. This is now the narrative again picks up after the proclamation. Look what it says in verse 5. "Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin in the priests and the Levites arose." So there were a number of these people who arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild. You see, God has stirred up Cyrus, and he's stirred up the people. The very reason they're on the journey, the very reason they're going to find themselves back in Jerusalem, the very reason they're going to find themselves fighting to build God's house, running and fighting, running and fighting, dealing with all the opposition is God has already been at work and is at work in them. You can't forget that. And the text makes that clear by saying. So he didn't just say, "These are the people that decided to go." No, these are the ones God's Spirit had stirred to go up and rebuild. And Cyrus didn't just decide to do it, God had stirred up his spirit to do it. And a Jew reading this passage, probably given as a book around 420 BC, after all these events have happened. I mean, the events in the text cover between 538 BC to about 430 BC, 108 years. And then the final form of book Ezra/Nehemiah was probably given some 10-15-20 years after that--420-415. And so the people that are receiving this message are looking now at the back end of all these things that have happened and God is essentially saying to them, "Listen, your purpose is still to be about my house, and your purpose will only be carried out if you remember my promise that I am with you."

As the Jews reading that would have seen something else that shows the idea that this promise is being made, "I am with you in the work." And it's a very interesting allusion

to the Exodus. Now one of the things that would have happened, people that were reading their Bibles carefully would have seen in Isaiah, couple different chapters in Isaiah, where he points out and likens the return from exile will be like a second Exodus. Okay. It'll be like a second Exodus. So if they were reading the prophets, they would have seen this. Like a second Exodus, and then thinking about that, like the Exodus, think about what Cyrus tells, instructs his people, his subjects, to do for the Israelites in verse 4. In verse 3 he was speaking to the Jews who want to go back, "Whoever there is among you of his people, may his God be with him," that's verse 3. "Let him go up and rebuild." Then verse 4, "Every survivor at whatever place he may live," he's still talking about the Jews. Look what he says next, "Let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a free-will offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem." He's saying, "Listen if you have Jews around you," he's speaking to all the other ethnicities in that, in his domain, he says, "If you have Jews who are going to go back to Jerusalem, what I want, I'm commanding you to do, is give them gold and silver and cattle, give them gifts."

Does that sound like something familiar? In Exodus chapter 3 when God told Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to let his people go, one of the things he said right there at the beginning was, "And when you go, I'm going to raise up, I'm going to show myself strong, and my glory, and I'm going to bring plagues upon Pharaoh, and he's going to send you out, and the people of that place are going to give you gold and silver and cattle and goods, so that you will plunder the Egyptians." That's exactly what happened after the final plague, the plague of the first-born. The people sent them out, and they sent them with all kinds of gifts, gold and silver, goods and cattle. This is an echo of the Exodus. And the faithful Jew reading this would have recognized that echo and thought, "Wow, isn't this amazing, God did exactly the same thing he did when he sent them out of Egypt." Even though this situation's a lot different, there is something wonderfully similar that shows that God is faithful. God is at work. The God who brought our fathers out of slavery in Egypt is bringing us out of slavery in Babylon; he's still building his kingdom.

And there's a third element in the passage, I think, that shows this idea of the promise the Lord is with you in the work. And that is this accounting in verses 7-11 of the bowls and of the silver dishes. I mean this is when you read something like this you have to ask yourself why is it here? I mean, you probably didn't wake up in this morning and think, "You know when I go to church today I really hope that the Lord helps me understand how many articles of silver and gold there were in Nebuchadnezzar's temple that he'd taken from... you know, that will just minister to my soul." And at first glance it doesn't, I mean wow... I mean when you find yourself reading through a passage like this, it's something that you kind of want to skip over you know, "Ok, yeah, yeah, moving on down." But all Scripture is profitable. What's going on here? He says, "Look, Cyrus, king of Persia, the things that Nebuchadnezzar had taken and put in the house of his god," Cyrus has now taken out of the house of Nebuchadnezzar's god and giving back to the people to take into Jerusalem into God's house. And he counts out all the numbers--this isn't a complete total number, the numbers don't add up to 5400--he's giving you a lot of specifics but not the whole accounting, but enough specifics to know this, that the Lord

had kept all of those articles under guard himself. He didn't allow Nebuchadnezzar or one of the Babylonian kings to think, "You know, I'm going to melt those things and make some silver bars out of them, or some gold bars out of them." No, God kept the articles from the temple. Why? Because he was always determined that they were going to go back to their place. The Lord hadn't forgot.

And so this insignificant detail is really a very significant detail that tells us that God, God's plan, is never, he never is out of step with his plan. He's not like us. We constantly have to plan and revise. Plan, A, Plan B, Plan C, now Plan C has Plan A, you know. That's how we live. That's not how God lives. His plan is completely, perfectly, in order. Now, from our viewpoint we can't see it, so we sometimes think it feels like his plan got twisted; no it never gets twisted. This was always his plan. Now, in the promise of their freedom, I've been unpacking for you those three examples: the reality of the promise, it's kind of like a 2A that I didn't give you the A 'till after I finished giving you the 1,2,3. Sorry about that. The reality of the promise is demonstrated in those three things. The Lord stirring up the echoes of the Exodus and the articles of the temple. That's the reality of the promise.

The necessity of the promise is what I want to talk about now: 2B. Why is it necessary for you and me as we go about the purpose of our freedom, building God's house--why is it necessary that we know the promise that the Lord is with us? Talked about this a little bit already, because basically it's that this is hard. And something that we have to see is how different, how different circumstances have a way of being from our expectations. This is just a fundamental problem of the human soul. We always want things to be easier; we always want things to work quicker. And part of that's because we were made for a perfect world. I mean that's just part of our wiring, we were made for Eden. And we don't live in Eden. So we're continually disappointed, we're continually finding that things aren't what we thought they would be. And the Lord has a way of underscoring that, highlighting, and emphasizing it. Because he wants us to know, "You are not home yet."

Heaven is our home. So don't get your roots too firmly rooted in this world. Hold things lightly. So our expectations have a way of missing out, missing the mark dramatically, and the way God unfolds himself, and I want you to think about this, I said there were echoes of the Exodus, right, in the plundering of the people around them, as it were, the gifts of the people, that in a sense was like the Exodus, where they gave them free will gifts as they left. I want you to think about how interesting it is the difference, the differences between the Exodus circumstantially, and the return from exile circumstantially.

I mean think about what was happening with the Exodus and how God was dealing with his people, how he's dealing with them differently now. I think this is very instructive. In the Exodus, they had the plagues, they saw God powerfully, mightily reveal himself in the opening of the Red Sea, they received manna from heaven, water from a rock, miracle, miracle, miracle, miracle, miracle, miracle, miracle. Dramatic visual miracles. They saw God visibly manifest as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

This was God's way of manifesting himself, and revealing himself. When they come back from the exile, there is no pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. God doesn't do something dramatic and make a river open up for them. God doesn't give them bread from heaven, water from a rock. Why? One thing that you see, and we'll talk about this more as we go through this book, is that as the Old Testament moves toward Christ, what you see is a lessening emphasis upon the outward and visible, and sort of spectacular, and a movement toward the inward, invisible, which means that faith is becoming more necessary. Because faith is the evidence of what? Things not seen. It's not that they have less faith in the people of Israel coming out of Egypt. They were not pillars of faith, were they? Go back and read Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, and you'll see they weren't. It's that God is doing something different--he's teaching us, he's explaining to us, that we're not to look for the signs and wonders and things like that, that's what the world loves.

Jesus said, "A wicked generation asks for a sign, but God, his people are to live by his Word." He's fixing our hearts on the Word, so that when you are trying to build God's house in your life, when you're trying to build God's house in the lives of other people, you're investing in the lives of other people, you're pouring yourself out into them, to see Christ formed in them to grow in grace and you encounter difficulty, and opposition, and discouragement, don't be surprised. This is normal. It's not supposed to be easy. And the reason is so that we will learn to cling to the Word because the word of God will make the difference. But God has a way of doing it in less spectacular ways and this, we will see when we get to heaven, is far more spectacular than if he were just... I mean, if you could go outside and spin a car on your finger and say, "I'm doing this through the power of Jesus Christ," you would just be like a circus, that's not what God is about. God is about people knowing you're a sinner, you need Christ, Jesus died for you, the Word of God will give you life, and make you fit for eternity.

I want to end up by just looking at one passage real quickly, Isaiah chapter 44. One of the things that we saw in the first verse, he said the word of the Lord in Ezra chapter 1, "By the word of the Lord by Jeremiah was fulfilled." Well, one of the neat things is to see what God said through Isaiah as well. Isaiah 44 verse 28, Isaiah prophesied between 730 and 685 or so, 690, 680, 45 or 50 years, 680 BC. He writes these words at least 100 years before Cyrus the Persian was born--do you get that? At least a hundred years before Cyrus the Persian was born. Persia is nothing at this point. Cyrus, I mean, his great-grandfather, something's going around, there's nothing about Cyrus, nobody's planning to name a child Cyrus--look what the Lord says, prophesying more than a hundred years before the birth of Cyrus, "It is I who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and he will perform all my desire, and he declares of Jerusalem," this is Cyrus now, "He's going to declare she will be built and of the temple your foundation will be laid." Chapter 45 verse 1, "Thus says the Lord to Cyrus his anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand that subdued nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut," He's talking, he identifies Cyrus the Persian way before he's even born! So why did Cyrus the Persian arise, and why did Cyrus the Persian declare that they're free to go back to the land of Israel? Because the word of the Lord said he would, In fact, it's interesting, verse 13 of chapter 45, he says, "I have aroused him in

righteousness, and I will make all his ways smooth, and he will build my city and will let my exiles go free.” This is chapter 45 verse 13, that really should say, it would be better if it said, “I have stirred him up,” verse 13, “In righteousness.” Same word that we have in Ezra chapter 1. “Stirred up. Aroused. Wakened,” “I’ve awakened him in righteousness and he will build my city, and will let my exiles go free. Without any payment or reward says the Lord of hosts, he will do this because I have told him to.” So, it’s not as spectacular from this point forward; we have a brief flurry of it under the ministry of Jesus, but again just to show us that the Word of God is what you build your life on.

So the purpose of our freedom is to build his house in our own hearts and in the lives of others, believers in the church, and people outside the church, that they can come into the church. And no matter how discouraged we are, if we keep our eyes on the promise that the Lord is with us, we will be able to bear up. One of the great last words of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, Matthew 28, verse 20, “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” and he says, “Remember, and lo, I am with you always, I am with you, even to the end of the age.”

Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for your Word; we thank you that, your Word does not fail. Father, we pray that you would help us be about your business in our lives, to put worship at the center, for you are worthy of that--that is what we were created to do, and nothing satisfies the heart like doing what we were created to do. We pray that you would help those here who have not repented and placed their faith in Christ to do that today, to understand that Jesus is a gracious Savior, that he has done everything necessary to make us, who are sinful, holy and right with God, and to make us true worshipers. We pray this in his name, Amen.