

## Stirred to Serve

**Text:** Ezra 1:1-11

### Introduction:

1. The first two chapters of Ezra deal with the return of the remnant. In chapter 1 we have the raising up of the saints and in chapter 2 the registry of the saints. In this message we will consider the raising up of the faithful remnant to return and rebuild.
2. From start to finish this work was of God. God and His sovereign rulership occupy center stage in this passage. We see God moving in the heart of a heathen king and in the hearts of his people to accomplish His plan.
3. The theme of Ezra deals very much with the restoration of the House of God in Jerusalem. The “house of the LORD God of Israel” is mentioned five times in this first chapter alone.
4. We will divide the chapter into four sections for our study.

### I. **A PROPHECY ACCOMPLISHED (VS. 1)**

Several strands of prophecy intersect at this pivotal moment in Biblical history in a most amazing way. The accuracy of Bible prophecy is breathtaking and a powerful testament to the truth of the Scriptures. We are reminded of the fulfillment of:

#### **A. Isaiah’s Prophecy (Is. 44:28-45:13)**

This is an amazing prophecy, written some 175 years earlier. This prophecy even names Cyrus before he was even born!

1. Note two key verses from this section of Isaiah.
  - a. Isaiah 44:28 “That saith of **Cyrus**, *He is* my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.
  - b. Isaiah 45:13 “I have raised him up in righteousness, and **I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward**, saith the LORD of hosts.”
2. From Isaiah’s prophecy in about 712 BC the story continues in the year 606 BC, a critical year in the history of the nation in the purposes of God. For the nation of Judah, it was the year when Nebuchadnezzar carried away to Babylon the first captives and the Temple vessels. Also, this was probably the same year in which Jeremiah uttered the prophecy that the captivity would run for seventy years. Those seventy years expired in 536 BC, the year of the return of the first captives to Jerusalem.

#### **B. Daniel’s Prophecy (Dan. 2:31-45)**

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1. Remember the image in Daniel's dream? The head of gold represented the kingdom of Babylon. The breast and arms of silver represented the Medo-Persian Empire.
2. Daniel 2:32 "This image's head was of fine gold, his **breast and his arms of silver**, his belly and his thighs of brass,"

### C. Jeremiah's Prophecy (Vs. 1a; Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-11)

1. This is the prophecy that is referenced specifically in Ezra 1:1. This is a reference to the fulfillment of the 70-year prophecy of Jeremiah.
  - a. Jer. 25:11-12 "And this whole land shall be a desolation, *and* an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**. And it shall come to pass, when **seventy years are accomplished**, *that* I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations."
  - b. Jer. 29:10 "For thus saith the LORD, That after **seventy years** be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place."
2. This proclamation was given in the "first year of Cyrus", a reference not to the first year he was king, but rather to the first year Babylon had been under his rule. This is the Cyrus known in history as "Cyrus the Great".
3. The seventy-year captivity began in 606 BC and in 536 BC Cyrus issues this amazing proclamation, allowing the Jews to go back to their homeland to rebuild the temple. The decree of Cyrus was the fulfillment of prophecy.

## II. A PROCLAMATION ANNOUNCED (VS. 1B-4)

### A. The Motivating of the Proclamation (Vs. 1b)

1. Moved by a Providential Stirring – "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus". God moved in the heart of this heathen king to ensure His plan was carried out. Someone defined Providence this way; "Providence is that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end." (Cited by Denis Lyle)
  - a. We are reminded of the truth of Proverbs 21:1 "The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."
  - b. We are reminded of the oft repeated truth in the Book of Daniel that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21).
  - c. We are reminded of the truth of 2 Chronicles 20:6 "And said, O LORD God of our fathers, *art* not thou God in heaven? and rulest *not* thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in

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thine hand *is there not* power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?”

- d. Thomas Watson said, “God can make a straight stroke with a crooked stick” and that’s what He did with Cyrus.
2. Moved by a Praying Saint
    - a. Daniel’s study of Jeremiah’s prophecy moved Him to pray a heartfelt prayer of confession, seeking God for the fulfilment of His promise. The decree of Cyrus was God’s answer to Daniel’s prayer! It is a reminder that God has included the prayers of the saints in the outworking of His purposes. What a marvelous thing!
    - b. Some even suggest that since Daniel continued unto the first year of Cyrus (Dan. 1:21) and occupied such a high position in the affairs of Babylon, it is even possible that Daniel shared Jeremiah’s prophecy with king Cyrus and helped draft the documents for the release of the Jewish people.
    - c. Harry Ironside writes, “People are often stumbled as to the relations of prayer and the purpose of God. If God has counselled, shall He not bring it to pass, whether we pray or not? The answer is that prayer is a part of God’s purpose. He has willed to act when His people pray; and one of the first evidences that He is about to perform a certain thing is that the spirit of prayer and supplication is poured out upon His people in regard to that particular work. Here He moves the heart of a king in his palace to accomplish His Word, after Daniel made it a matter of prayer.”

### **B. The Magnitude of the Proclamation (Vs. 1c)**

1. This proclamation was made throughout the Persian Empire and also formalized in writing. Heralds would have been dispatched throughout the empire to proclaim the news and public notices posted in key locations.
2. What a testimony in that day to One True God of Israel and the truth of His Word. Look at the Revelation of God’s Person in the proclamation that went out (Vs. 2). God always provides the light of truth in every generation.

### **C. The Mandate for the Proclamation (Vs. 2)**

Verse 2-4 contain the contents of the proclamation. This heathen king made this proclamation with a sense that he was acting under at the direction of Almighty God. He acknowledges:

1. The Reign of Almighty God (Vs. 2a)
  - a. The Supremacy of God – “the LORD God of heaven”. The title “God of heaven” is used some seventeen times in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel.
  - b. The Sovereignty of God – “hath given me all the kingdoms”.

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- c. A wise ruler will recognize the supreme authority and sovereignty of God.
  - d. Illustration: Australia's Parliamentary Prayer – "Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouch safe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia."<sup>1</sup>
2. The Rulership of Almighty God (Vs. 2b). A wise ruler will submit to God's supreme authority in his governance of a people. While Cyrus was a heathen king, he wisely submitted himself to God's authority in this matter.

### D. The Mission in the Proclamation (Vs. 3-4)

We now get to the heart of the proclamation that was made. Since God was the one who stirred king Cyrus to write this proclamation, this was His Word for His people, communicated through the instrumentality of Cyrus. There is a two-fold exhortation to God's people. There is:

1. An Exhortation to Go (Vs. 3)
  - a. Go with the Presence of God – "his God be with him".
  - b. Go to the Place of God – "go up to Jerusalem".
  - c. Go for the Purpose of God – "build the house of the LORD God of Israel".
2. An Exhortation to Give (Vs. 4)
  - a. There is a sense where we are all called to give and go as God's people in the New Testament church. However, we should remember that so far as a specific ministry calling is concerned, some are called to be pioneers and leaders of God's work. Others are called to be supporters of God's work.
  - b. One is not more important the other. The important thing is that we all play the part God gives us in His grand and glorious work.

## III. A PEOPLE AWAKENED (VS. 5-6)

These verses record the response of God's people to the king's proclamation.

### A. The Stirring up of the Remnant (Vs. 5)

1. Again, we note the hand of the Lord moving in the situation to accomplish His plan. First, we saw the Lord stirring the heart of a heathen king. Now we see Him stirring the heart of His covenant people. The word 'raised' is from the same Hebrew word translated "stirred up" in Vs. 1.

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2. Is not this an example and definition of true revival when God stirs the hearts of the saints to a deeper consecration to Himself? We note two features of a genuine revival:
  - a. Divine Sovereignty – true revival cannot be manufactured; it comes when God moves. A work that is of God has its source in Him and must be initiated by Him. Return, recovery, restoration and revival all begin with God and His Word.
  - b. Human Responsibility – true revival involves a response on our part to the moving of God. We have no power to produce a revival but we can endeavour to be a prepared and yielded people, ready for God to stir. Someone put it this way, “we cannot send the wind but we can hoist the sails”.
3. You will notice that four groups of people are mentioned as being touched by the Lord. It highlights that every level of Jewish society was affected.
  - a. The chief of the fathers – these would be the heads at that time of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In any work of God leadership is as essential today as it was then. It is so vital that those in positions of leadership be submitted to the Lord’s stirring.
  - b. The priests – the descendants of Aaron and spiritual leaders of the temple worship. “They represented the people in the presence of God and their key activity was worship. The house of God today requires priestly men and women.” (M.K. Hall)
  - c. The Levites – the rest of the tribe of Levi apart from Aaron’s family who also had vital service roles in relation to the temple worship. “Levi had three sons Gershon, Kohath and Merari. Their descendants were responsible for the care of the Tabernacle and all its parts (Num. 3:17-37). If worship characterised the priestly family of Aaron, service was the hallmark of the rest of the tribe of Levi. Every believer needs to be of Levite character, engaged in the service of the assembly.” (M.K. Hall)
  - d. The people – “all them whose spirit God had raised”. This is a beautiful description of all the ordinary people who went up.

### **B. The Support of the Remnant (Vs. 6)**

1. The actual number who responded to Cyrus’ decree was very small, in all about fifty thousand people. The journey involved a four-to-five-month journey and a distance of almost 1,000 miles. This was likely one reason why many chose not to make the trip.
2. But to their credit, those who remained behind were stirred to participate in a ministry of support for the pioneers of faith. They “strengthened the hands” of those going to do the work. Every venture for the Lord needs a support team. They say that behind

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every soldier on the battle field there are at least 10 people at home working to support that soldier in the battle. God does not call everyone to be a pastor, missionary or evangelist but every one can be in the Lord's service by fulfilling the role God has given them, whatever that may be.

3. In this example, not only were there those prepared to sacrifice to do the work, there were those prepared to sacrifice to support the work. This is why a strong home base is vital if we are going to support the advancement of the Gospel at home and abroad.
4. Those who remained supported the work through their giving. We are reminded of the timeless principle seen throughout the whole Bible that God's primary method for providing for His work is through the freewill offerings of His people. There are five principles of giving we can learn from their example. Their giving was:
  - a. Universal – they "all" contributed to the work. A strong church is one where all its members are contributors to the work of God in some way as opposed to what is often the case where a small percentage tithes and gives while the others freeload.
  - b. Purposeful – they gave for both the support of God's workmen and God's work. Note Vs. 4. They were to give to help the workers as well as "the freewill offering for the house of God".
  - c. Practical – they gave items that would meet the needs of the pioneers of faith. Some people give their junk to the work of God which ends up being a burden rather than a blessing to the servants of God.
  - d. Plentiful – their giving was generous and sacrificial. The term "precious things" refers to things which are choice and costly.
  - e. Volitional – their giving was done voluntarily; they "willingly offered". True giving is a matter of liberty, not law. 2 Cor. 9:7 "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so *let him give*; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for **God loveth a cheerful giver.**" Remember, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

### IV. A PROVISION AFFORDED (VS. 7-11)

#### A. The Prince responsible for the Temple Treasure (Vs. 8, 11)

1. Cyrus entrusted the temple treasures to one named Sheshbazzar. He is noted as "the prince of Judah". One thing we see in Ezra is the Lord providing leadership for His work. Who was this Sheshbazzar? We believe he is Zerubbabel.
2. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The older commentators and Jewish writers through the centuries (including Josephus) were correct in identifying Sheshbazzar as Zerubbabel. Both are

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described as governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14; Hag. 1:1; 2:2). Both are credited with laying the foundation of the house of God (3:8-11; 5:16). Sheshbazzar appears to be his Babylonian name. It would have been the official name used in Persian and Babylonian court circles. He is described in this chapter as “the prince of Judah” (Vs. 8). He was also the rightful heir to the throne of Judah as the genealogy of the Lord in Matthew 1:12 makes clear. Jechonias is Jehoiachin, the last but one king of Judah (1 Chr. 3:16; 2 Chr. 36:9). Salathiel’s (Zerubbabel’s father) alternative name is Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2). It is consistent with this that Sheshbazzar is called the “governor” (5:14), having been appointed by Cyrus. He has the stamp of royalty and authority about him. The name Sheshbazzar is used in the context of chapter 1 because of the official connection between him and Mithredath in respect of the recovery of the vessels.”

### B. The Precious things in the Temple Treasure (Vs. 7-11)

1. The temple vessels were all that remained of value from Solomon’s glorious temple. God in His grace ensured they were preserved and returned.
2. David Sorenson provides a helpful summary of the temple vessels, “Because of their sacred as well as monetary value, careful record was made of exactly how many vessels were to be sent back to Jerusalem. The reference to the charges of gold and silver may have been used at one time as the containers of water of purification at the Temple. The gold and silver basins may have been used in collecting the blood of the sacrifices which was to be sprinkled on the altar. The gold and silver knives likely were those used in the ceremonial slaying and dressing of the sacrificial animals. Altogether, 5,400 sacred vessels were directed to be sent with Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) back to Jerusalem.”
3. A New Testament application would be that the temple vessels are a picture of the believer God can use. “Emptied that Thou shouldest fill me, a clean vessel in thine hand” (Mary E. Maxwell).

**Conclusion:** Any genuine work is a work that is initiated, empowered and blessed by God Himself. Our job is to remain yielded and surrendered to allow Him to work in and through us. We could summarize it by saying that a genuine work of God is:

1. Initiated by God’s Providence.
2. Supplied by God’s Provision.
3. Defended by God’s Protection.
4. Accomplished by God’s Power.

**Are you available for the Lord to use?**