

Ezra Chapter 1

Theme: Restoring the spiritual heart of the nation.

Key Verse: Ezra 7:10 “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

Background: Ezra is known as the first of the post-captivity books; it covers an important part of the history of Israel, specifically their release from captivity under the Babylonian Empire.

- The Northern kingdom had been conquered and taken captive by the Assyrian Empire. Their tactic was to remove the inhabitants of their conquered lands and re-populate the area with people from other conquered territories, kind of like a shell game.
- They thought they could prevent uprisings by breaking down their morale and their sense of national identity.
- So the various cultures were assimilated into each other and they became a conglomeration of people with no particular national identity.
- As these people married and intermarried, becoming mixed, they became known as Samaritans - later considered 1/2 breeds by the Jews of Judaea, a mixed race and un-acceptable in the service of the Lord.
- When the Babylonians conquered Judah, the Southern kingdom they made it a point to take most of the people back to Babylon, leaving hardly anybody behind to take care of the land - so the land lay mostly desolate during their captivity.
- The captives of Judah as we will see were able to maintain their national and ethnic identity throughout their captivity.
- Remember as well that the southern kingdom of Judah had representatives from all 12 tribes within their borders - so that even though the 10 northern tribes were assimilated into the Assyrian Empire, all 12 tribes were still maintained in the Southern kingdom - this means that there are no lost tribes of Israel.

Map - 4 month journey:

- As we approach this chapter, the time has come once again for the Word of God to be fulfilled.
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V: 1-4 These first 2 1/2 verses are virtually the same as the last three verses of 2 Chronicles 36.

“1... in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia...” This is the first year of his reign after the victory over the Babylonians.

- Cyrus began his reign over Persia in 552 BC. Judah was first conquered and taken captive by Babylon in 605 BC, then destroyed in 587 BC.
- Cyrus / Persians conquer the Babylonians in 539 BC, and in the first year of his reign after that victory he releases the Jewish captives to go home and re-build their temple, that puts this at about 535-6 BC, accounting for 70 years from 605 BC.
- Fulfilling the Word of the Lord by the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 25:11-12 “¹¹And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹²And it shall come to pass, when the 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.”

Jeremiah 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.”

- Jeremiah had predicted that the period of captivity would be seventy years. Then in Daniel Ch. 9 which takes place a little before this in 535 BC or so, Daniel began to fast and pray and seek the Lord having read Jeremiah's prophecy realizing that the 70 was almost over.
- Daniel had moved from being a captive to a counselor in Nebuchadnezzar's court, then to semi-retirement under his son and grandson, and is now back in the game as a governor under Cyrus. As Daniel fasted and prayed, God revealed to him the timing of the coming of the Messiah - which we just celebrated as the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on April 6, 32 AD.
- The Lord touches or stirs up Cyrus's heart who then makes this proclamation about releasing the Jews and sending them to re-build the Temple it is very likely that God used Daniel to influence Cyrus.

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.”

2 Peter 1:19-21 “¹⁹We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day

dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: ²⁰Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. ²¹For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

- Cyrus’ proclamation was inspired by God; but it’s not included in the Word of God, the cannon of scripture - this passage simply describes the proclamation.
- Daniel was a prophesy buff; not only paying attention to his contemporaries like Jeremiah but he was also keeping track of Isaiah. Daniel at one point showed Cyrus how God had raised him up and used him, naming him before he was born, or made king.

Isaiah 44:24-45:3 Turn to / read. “Anointed” - “Shepherd” - “loosing the loins of kings” - “called by name...” Why? To accomplish his will, certainly; but ³“that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by name, am the God of Israel.”

- As you read the book of Daniel, at the time of the fall of Babylon - the night that Babylon fell Belshazzar was having a drunken feast for all of his princes. He knew that the Persians were outside the walls waiting to attack but he was over confident, and partied on. At one point he orders that the vessels from the Temple be brought in so he can drink from them.
- As they’re in the middle of all of this a disembodied hand appears and begins to write on the wall - and there is a panic amongst the party goers who are instantly sobered up.

Daniel Ch. 5 “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.”

Daniel 5:6 “Then the king’s countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.”

- This was described and ascribed to Cyrus long before it ever happened.
- As the Persians laid siege against the great fortress city of Babylon it was indeed a tough nut to crack - walls 300 feet tall, 87 feet wide at the top, enough for 6 chariots to race abreast of each other.
- The river Euphrates ran directly through and under the city. According to the historian Herodotus there were large gates at the wall that when left open would allow the river to flow freely through the city, then at night they would be closed to secure the city.

- On this particular night the gates were left open. While the Babylonians were getting drunk, the Persian army diverted the river and the Persians came in through the dry riverbed through the open gates.

Isaiah 45:1 "... I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut." Calling Cyrus by name...

- This was written 180 years before this decree even went out, 150 years before Cyrus was born!

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."

- How do you think God stirred up Cyrus' heart? The same way He does with us, look at the verse: it's a combination of His Spirit and His Word.

Psalms 119:18 "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy Law."

Daniel was a good witness who influenced kings:

Daniel 6:25-26 "25Then king Darius wrote unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you. 26I make a decree, that in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for He is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and His dominion shall be even unto the end."

- **Total side note:** Daniel Ch. 4 is written by **Nebuchadnezzar** - his testimony, he became a believer in the True and living God. Here we're seeing both **Darius** and **Cyrus** who are two different men; come to a place of acknowledging "the Lord God of Heaven" as we read in **V:2**.
- Through all of this Cyrus is being brought to the same understanding that the Psalmist came to:

Psalms 139:13-14 "13For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. 14I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."

- Bringing this back into Ezra: In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, Babylon has been conquered in fulfillment of the Word of God, or so that the Word of God would be fulfilled.

V: 2 Cyrus is correctly attributing his reign as having been appointed by the Lord God of Heaven who has charged him, commanded him to build Him a house in Jerusalem. Cyrus admits that he's taking orders from God...

- We see him seeking to be obedient to that command, which had been given to him in Isaiah's prophecy before he was born.

V: 3 Cyrus is asking: "Who among you of the people of God wish to go back to rebuild the temple?"

- It has been estimated that there were close to two million Jews living in Babylon. During the seventy years of their captivity, they had, in many cases, prospered quite extensively. So how many would be willing to go back to Judah? Out of two million, we'll see only about 49,000 willing to leave their Babylonian lifestyle and trade the relative comforts of Babylon for the work that lay ahead in Jerusalem. (2%)
- Cyrus is not stating that the Lord is the localized God of Jerusalem as many of the gods were thought to be at that time. He's already acknowledged that He is the "²Lord God of Heaven" - He's the "³Lord God of Israel" who is simply identified with Jerusalem, His city.

V: 4 As this point Cyrus is recruiting Jews to go back and get busy. There are some that will go and engage in the mission, there are some who will stay back and support those who are going.

- We're not all called to be missionaries in foreign places, or to do some of the practical things of ministry - be we are all called to support the work of God - He wants to work through and use all of us.

Colossians 3:23 "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men."

- Whether we're called to stay back and support, or whether we're called to the front in some way - we serve the Lord in all things.

V: 5-6 God working through His Spirit raised up those that He would send to Jerusalem, God also used those who would stay behind to support the work of those that would go.

- God is still working in the same way today, stirring up the Spirit within Cyrus, and stirring up the Spirit within His people.

Philippians 2:13 "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

- Often times God plants a seed of desire in our hearts, as it grows - then He gives us the ability, the power to do that which He desires to do in and through us.

“... **willingly offered.**” That is the only way to make a true offering.

- We're not to give to God out of guilt, or constraint, through manipulation - but willingly from a joyful heart.

2 Corinthians 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.**”

V: 7-11 Cyrus gave them back all the vessels of the house of the Lord taken by Nebuchadnezzar, preparing them to worship in the Temple they were going to re-build.

- Mithredath the treasurer accounted for and handed over to Sheshbazzar the vessels of the Temple.
- I don't know the specific significance of these numbers - but I do gather that God is into the details - 30 gold chargers, 29 knives...
- **If God is into these kinds of minute details then I believe that God is totally into the details of our lives, He cares more than we can know.**
- Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah is the name that the Babylonians gave to Zerubbabel whom real more of later.
- Sheshbazzar = “Rejoicing in distress.”
- The Babylonians changed the name of their more prominent captives, taking away their identity.

Daniel 1:6-7 “**⁶Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ⁷Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Beltshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah of Abed-nego.**”

- The enemy of our soul always wants to re-define who we are, how we would act, and what our final destiny would be. All the names that the Babylonians gave to the children of Israel were related to the various Babylonian gods.
- The enemy gives them new identities hoping that they would subsequently live up or perhaps down to their names.
- **The opposite is true of our God: We too get new names the difference is why and how.**

2 Corinthians 5:17 “**Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.**”

- When that change takes place because of the power of the Holy Spirit, because of the blood of Jesus Christ working in our lives - when we are a new creature - then we get a new name.
 1. Abram - Abraham: Believed / righteousness - breath / ruach / Spirit of God.
 2. Jacob - Israel: fought & finally surrendered.
 3. Simon - Peter: Believed in his heart and confessed with his lips
 4. Saul - Paul: struck down, humiliated, humbled, blinded, Lord - sight.
- Each of these men had to make a choice, each brought to a place of surrender. Much like the children of Israel in Babylon. Some chose to remain in bondage & captivity - some chose freedom and hardship. Either way it's a choice.

Revelation 2:17 “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden mana, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saying he that receiveth it.”