

King Cyrus Permits the Jews to return from Captivity in Babylon

Ezra 1

Ezra 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 through out all his kingdom and also put it in writing saying, “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 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.”*

Then the heads of the father’s houses of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levities, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. 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. 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. And Cyrus, King of Persia, brought them out by the hand of Mithradath, the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the Prince of Judah. This is the number of them: 30 gold platters, 1,000 silver platters, 29 knives, 30 gold basins, 410 silver basins of a similar kind, and 1,000 other articles. All the articles of gold and silver were 5,400. All of these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.”

Background Notes

The events recorded in this book of Ezra took place relatively late in Old Testament history. Because of Judah’s sins of idolatry and immorality, God had allowed Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies to conquer the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586BC. The city of Jerusalem and Solomon’s beautiful Temple were destroyed, and the Jewish survivors were taken into exile in Babylon.

Cyrus and the Persian armies overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539BC. Cyrus issued a royal decree in 538BC that allowed and encouraged the captive peoples to return to their respective homelands to rebuild the temples of their gods. The “Edict of Cyrus” was inscribed on a clay cylinder, known as the “Cyrus Cylinder.” It can be seen in the British Museum. Archaeology backs up the accuracy of Ezra 1!

As a result of the Edict of Cyrus, about 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel (whose Persian name was Sheshbazzar - v8 & 11). After they rebuilt the altar of sacrifice, the people began to rebuild the Temple of the Lord that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. At first the project went well and the foundation of the new Temple was laid. But then, because of discouragement, apathy, and enemy threats, the work stopped. No work was done on the house of the Lord for 15 to 16 years. Finally, under the motivating ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, work was resumed on the Temple project. The rebuilt Temple was completed in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after it was destroyed. (By the way, that is one way to calculate the 70-year Babylonian captivity.)

All these events are covered in Ezra chapters 1-6. Chapters 7-10 of the book are about a second return from Babylon in 458 BC, when about 2,000 Jews returned under the leadership of Ezra. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Ezra wrote this book of Scripture in about 450 BC.

Doctrinal Points

1. God moves the hearts of kings to fulfill His good word.

Verse 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.”*

The Persian Empire was polytheistic and did not follow the one true God, yet God moved the heart of King Cyrus to fulfill the word of the Lord as spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, who had predicted that the Jews would return from their captivity after 70 years. *“This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

More than 200 years before this time, the prophet Isaiah predicted the rise of Cyrus - **by name!** Isaiah 44:28 - *“The Lord 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.’”* And Isaiah chapter 45:1 - *“Thus says the LORD to His anointed to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him.”*

What an amazing prophecy! The fact that this prophecy refers to Cyrus as *“the Lord’s anointed”* and *“the Lord’s shepherd”* does not mean the Cyrus was a believer. No. In fact, in Isaiah 45:4-5 the Lord said of Cyrus, *“You have not known me.”* We don’t know whether Cyrus ever became a believer, but he certainly was used as a tool in the hand of the Lord. Through Cyrus, God fulfilled His prophetic word for Israel. And God not only moved the heart of Cyrus to issue the edict that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem - God moved his heart to return all the Temple treasures that the Babylonians had taken from Solomon’s Temple (v6-8)!

God can do the same today. Proverbs 21:1 says, “*The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; like the rivers of water he turns it wherever he wishes.*” Are you facing a major difficulty or decision in your personal life, in which someone’s heart needs to be moved? God can do it! If God can move the heart of a king, He can move the heart of others in answer to your prayers.

Is your church confronting a major difficulty or decision in which outside help is needed? God can move hearts! Whether the problem is a legal threat, or a zoning ordinance, or a situation where help from an official is needed, don’t be anxious! God has promised in His Word that He wants to bless us, and God can move the hearts of kings to fulfill His good word!

2. God moves the hearts of His people to accomplish His good will.

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.*”

Think of the logistics of organizing 50,000 people to travel, on foot, about 900 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem! No small project! As many of you know, my wife and I lead Holy Land tours, and you cannot even begin to imagine the logistics involved in moving just 50 people around in an air conditioned bus - let alone 50,000 people on foot for 900 miles! Quite a project! But Ezra 1 says that this great project was accomplished because God stirred the hearts of his people. Even those who didn’t go back to Jerusalem were moved and motivated to give generously to the project. It’s amazing what can be accomplished when God stirs the hearts of His people!

It’s still true today! God still accomplishes his good will by moving the hearts of his people. Think, for example, of evangelistic summer camps and conference centers. Think of how many people have come to know the Lord and have grown in their faith because of these ministries! Now how did these ministries get started? By God moving in the hearts of His people. First their hearts were stirred because of the need, and then their hearts were motivated to see the vision become a reality. The heart-stirring may begin with only one person, or maybe a few people - but if the project is in the will of God, before long many more hearts will be motivated. God moves the hearts of His people to accomplish His good will.

Practical Applications

1. Have you returned God’s stolen property?

All of the articles of silver and gold mentioned in verses 7-11 were treasures from Solomon’s Temple. The Babylonians

had **stolen** them from the house of the Lord - but now they were being returned to Jerusalem for use in the rebuilt Temple.

There's a lesson here. If you're a believer, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Before we became Christians, we had stolen God's property. We used our time, our talent, our money, and even our bodies for our own selfish interests. But now that we're believers, have we returned that stolen property to God? How much of your **time** or your **talent** or your ability have you returned to the Lord? How much of your **money** have you returned to the Lord? Convicting questions, aren't they? Have you returned God's stolen property?

2. Let God do more than just "open the door!"

"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" (v4).

Verse 4 is part of the "Edict of Cyrus," the decree that allowed and encouraged Jews to return to Jerusalem. God not only opened the door for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but in the Edict of Cyrus God made sure that provision was made for their return as well. What an amazing decree! The Persian Emperor commanded the citizens of Persia to provide the financial needs and material needs for their Jewish neighbors to return to Jerusalem! And this financial provision was in addition to the freewill offering that they were expected to give for the Temple. What an amazing blessing!

The most amazing thing of all, though, is that the Persian neighbors gave willingly! Verse 6: *"All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering."* God not only moved the heart of a Persian king - He moved the hearts of the Persian people as well!

Can God do that today? Of course he can! **When God opens doors, He provides the means to go through those doors.** So wait on the Lord for His provision.

Let God do **more** than just open the door!