

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ezra 1-2: The Return of the Exiles

Welcome to Persia! The year is about 538 BC, and we're in the period of Old Testament history known as the exile. Centuries earlier, God had made a covenant with Abraham to bless him, and give him land and descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). Although the people ended up as slaves in Egypt, God brought them out through Moses and eventually into the land. They were told that their well-being in the land depended on their obedience to God's law. Unfortunately, as the Old Testament shows, they disobeyed God and eventually were punished by God by being dragged off into exile by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

The people were in exile – far away from their land, far away from their capital city, far away from the temple, with no sacrifices, no high priest, no king, and under God's judgment. Where is Jerusalem? Ruined! Where is the temple? Pulled to the ground! Where are the temple vessels? In Babylon's treasury!

So, when the book of Ezra begins, the people of God are in a mess! The superpowers in the world at the time were Babylon and Persia. Judah was a postage-sized kingdom by comparison, which the Persians referred to as 'that land beyond the river'. Who cares about them? And the answer is that *God* does! He not only cares; he moves *hearts* and he moves *history* for the sake of his people.

God's people were *broken*, but we're about to be restored: not just physically in terms of returning to the *land*, but restored spiritually in terms of returning to the *Lord*; not just rebuilding a broken temple, broken homes, and broken walls, but rebuilding broken lives, broken morality, and broken worship. That's what Ezra and Nehemiah are about. So, how do we begin? We begin with a decree.

1. The Decree (1:1-11)

A decree is an edict, or a proclamation by someone in authority; that someone here is

Cyrus king of Persia. Babylon had been the major world power up to this time, but Persia was slowly taking over. Babylon's last night is described in Daniel 5, where as part of the party King Belshazzar decided to use the gold and silver goblets from the Jerusalem temple that his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had brought back before destroying the temple. The writing was on the wall – literally in this case – saying that he had been weighed and found wanting; that very night Persia conquered Babylon. The Persian empire then included all we now know as Syria and Israel in addition to Iran and Iraq.

Whereas the Babylonians carried people away from their homelands, and forced them into exile, the Persians were generally happy for them to go home. Cyrus sought to reestablish religions, he had a high regard to sacred sites, and he tried to repatriate people back in their lands. We get a flavour of this in his proclamation in 1:2-4, where he orders the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, allows displaced people to return home, and encourages Jews who didn't want to go back to offer financial support to those who did.

God used an unbelieving, pagan, polytheistic king to bring about his purposes for his people. In fact, a number of passages in Isaiah even speak of Cyrus as God's 'anointed', raised up by God to do his work (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). And the writer of Ezra agrees, as 1:1 makes clear. It is the *Lord* who moved the heart of Cyrus. And what Cyrus did fulfilled the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. A few passages in Jeremiah could be in mind, perhaps especially Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10-14 (and the whole of Jeremiah 51 is given over to describing the fall of Babylon). God moved the heart of Cyrus by his power. God fulfilled his word through Jeremiah.

In any case, what is the response to the decree? 1:5 shows that just as God moved the heart of Cyrus, so now he moves the hearts of his

people (1:5). Moreover, the articles of silver and gold mentioned in 1:6 (and then again in 1:11) remind us of the exodus (e.g., Exodus 12:35-36), when the people of Israel were given these sorts of items as they left Egypt. What's happening in coming home from exile is like another exodus: the people are leaving a situation of captivity and they are going to their proper home.

More than this, Cyrus brings out the precious items which were taken from the temple (1:7-8). The Lord is removing that stigma; the Lord is restoring his people and restoring his place of worship. 1:9-10 emphasises that each vessel was tallied, each one accounted for.

If chapter 1 is taken up with a decree, chapter 2 is taken up with a list.

2. The List (2:1-70)

The list of names is introduced in 2:1-2, and it then follows, spelling out different categories of people: lay people, priests, levites, singers, gatekeepers, servants.

The list might appear boring to modern readers, but being on this particular list meant you were part of God's plan of restoration, and *that's* not boring! The list also shows how much people valued ancestry (2:59, 62). That's something which doesn't look too politically correct these days, but is an important theme in Ezra-Nehemiah, where there is an emphasis on not compromising ancestry by mixing with those who were not classed as pure. Nothing must get in the way of restoration.

The list concludes in 2:64 onwards, where we notice that the people gave special gifts toward the rebuilding effort (2:68-69). The chapter ends with resettlement (2:70).

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The sovereign God

In our first study, we said that one of the important lessons we learn from Ezra and Nehemiah is that God's in charge. We sometimes say that God is *sovereign*, and we can see his sovereignty loud and clear in these chapters. The Lord fulfils his word through

Jeremiah; the Lord moves the heart of the Cyrus; the Lord moves the hearts of his people

This is the same sovereign God that we know. There is no part of our lives that stands outside his sovereignty. Who's in charge? God's in charge. He's in charge of his people; he's in charge of *all* people. This is important because we can sometimes be tempted to limit what God is in charge of. We limit him to the *personal* realm, perhaps: me and my life, or my family. Or we limit him to the *religious* realm. But he's in charge of the *public* realm, the *political* realm, the *international* realm. He's not frightened by Al Quaeda, he's not taken by surprise by what's happening in Sudan. God doesn't belong in a box labelled 'religion' or 'personal belief', or 'private world'; he's sovereign over *everything*.

That's why it's right, as Christians, that we keep up to date with world concerns, why it's right that we pray for the world, why it's a good thing for us to be informed about larger world issues. Because the world is in God's hands.

The faithful God

He's not only sovereign, he's *faithful* too. Later on, when the people lay the foundation of the temple, what do they sing? Ezra 3:11 tells us: 'he is good; his love towards Israel endures forever.' After 70 years in Babylon, they're singing about God's faithfulness!

This is the same faithful God we know. Although we're not always faithful to him, he is always faithful to us. He's faithful to us as individuals, and he is faithful to us as a church. We're still going, not because we're so great, but because God is so faithful. Our God is the God of Ezra and he is faithful. Amen.