

January 21, 2024

A PROMISED FULFILLED
Ezra 1-2
(1 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)

This morning we begin a nine-sermon study through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Originally these were considered one book, covering a period in Israel's history from about 539 BC to 433 BC. But in order to understand the significance of the events in these books, we have to go back earlier about fifty years earlier. At that time, Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, surrounding the city, and keeping anyone or anything from coming in or going out. The conditions became so bad that starving mothers boiled and ate their own children (Lam 4:10). Finally, after the siege had lasted for eighteen months and there was no food left and no strength remaining among the Israelites to put up a realistic fight, the Babylonians broke down the walls of the city, took the people captive, and burned much of the city, including the Lord's temple. Those taken captive were exiled to Babylon.

But as devastating as it was, the Bible made clear that this was nothing less than the Lord's judgment. The people had forsaken his ways and broken his laws repeatedly, and the prophets declared what would happen if they did. In 586 BC it finally did happen as the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered and the people exiled to Babylon. This important event in the Scripture is known as "the exile."

As the book of Ezra begins, we're now about fifty years after the exile, and Babylon itself has been conquered by the Persians, under the leadership of their king, Cyrus. And in the first year of his reign as head of the latest world power (now that Babylon has been conquered), Cyrus issues a decree that those Israelites who wanted could go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple were free to do so, and he would even pay give them materials for the task (Ezra 1:1-4). That's where the book of Ezra-Nehemiah begins.

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah can be divided into four parts. In Ezra 1-6 we see the first group of exiles come back under the leadership of Zerubbabel and rebuild the temple. Then, in Ezra 7-10 (about fifty years later), there is a second group of exiles who come back, and this group is led by Ezra. His aim was not to build anything physical as much as to bring renewal to the people of God, bringing them back to obedience to the law of Moses. Thirteen years after this, Nehemiah comes back and leads people to rebuild the wall around the city, which is recorded in Nehemiah 1-6. And, finally, in Nehemiah 7-13 you see Nehemiah and Ezra seeking further to reform the people of God in light of God's Word.

Those are the four major sections of the book, and these broad divisions are why when I first preached these books twenty-one years ago I did it in four messages. But on this journey through these books, we will slow down a bit from that pace and work our way through this book in nine messages, starting this morning by looking at Ezra 1-2. And as I walk through the

events of these two chapters, I want to do it under two headings: God sovereignly fulfills his promises, and God provides for every need. Let's start with the first.

God sovereignly fulfills his promises

The text opens saying, "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 throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever 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 rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem'" (1:1-3).

So, we can see that Cyrus makes a decree that as many Israelites as want can now go back home to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple there. But why does Cyrus do this? Let me answer that on two levels. First, let's look at it from Cyrus's point of view. It may look to us as we read this that Cyrus was something of a believer and worshiper of Yahweh, but I actually don't think that's the case. In 1879 archaeologists discovered a clay cylinder, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, that was written in Babylonian cuneiform, and there were a few interesting tidbits outlined within it. First, in it, Cyrus credits the Babylonian god, Marduk, with establishing Cyrus as king of the world power. And, second, it describes his policy of allowing each people who'd been captive under him to return to their homes, restore the temples and images of their gods, and even receive materials to help in the project. The drive behind this is spelled out in terms gaining the benevolence of these other gods.¹ That is, he desired that these peoples would go home, worship their god, pray to him, and ask their god to bless Cyrus. In other words, it was a very politically savvy action, driven by self-interest. So that's one reason why we can say that Cyrus did this. But the text gives a deeper reason.

The Scripture tells us that Cyrus did this because "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" to do this (v. 1). In other words, God sovereignly moved the heart of Cyrus to do this. God exercised his control of all things to move Cyrus to take this action, which fits with the Lord's testimony about himself as we read in Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."

But why did God choose to move Cyrus's heart to take this action at this very time? Well, that question is also answered in the text as we read in verse 1: "That the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah the prophet might be fulfilled." You see, years before Cyrus took this action, the Lord had made a promise through the prophet Jeremiah that Israel's captivity in Babylon

¹ I gathered this information about the Cyrus cylinder from W. Brian Aucker, *Ezra-Job*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 29-30 and Derek Thomas *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 5.

would only last seventy years. In Jeremiah 25:11-12 the Lord had declared that seventy years after Judah's captivity, the Lord would judge and punish the king of Babylon (which had happened as Persia conquered them). Then in Jeremiah 29:10 the Lord had said to his people, "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place." Isaiah had even prophesied that Cyrus would be the Lord's chosen instrument to bring this about (Is 44:28; 45:1).

So the main reason Cyrus did this is because the Lord exercised his sovereign control over all things to stir Cyrus's heart in order to fulfill the promise that he'd made years earlier through his prophets. But we don't see the Lord's sovereign hand just in stirring up Cyrus to make this decree that the Israelites can go back home. We also see it in that individuals actually do get up and go.

You see, it wasn't a situation where they'd come back to nice homes and a fortified city. They'd come back to a city in ruins, with its walls destroyed, and homes left in desolation. Moreover, Cyrus wasn't commanding anyone to go back. What if no one chose to go? Well, that question is answered in 1:5 as we read, "Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, and everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem."

You see, it's not by accident that groups chose to go back to Jerusalem any more than it was a nice coincidence that Cyrus issued this decree and issued it at the time he did. In each case the Scripture tells us that these acted because the Lord stirred up their spirits to do so.

From someone who was a historian without the benefit of having the Scripture, someone could explain Cyrus's actions as mere political expediency and the Jews going home as the reasonable actions of a people who treasured their homeland. But the Bible will not allow us to reduce the decisions of each this way. The book of Ezra makes clear that God is the main actor here. He's sovereignly moving the heart of the king and the hearts of his people in order to fulfill a promise that he'd made to bring his people back home after seventy years of captivity.

Now, let me clear up a question you may have. If you're doing the math, you may be saying that this doesn't add up. If the Lord promised their deliverance after seventy years, and the exile began in 586 BC and Cyrus made his decree in 438 BC, that's just under fifty years. So, what do we do this this? It seems there are two options that may line up. One is to start with the time when Babylon first started exiling Jews. In 605 BC some Jews, including Daniel, were exiled, and so if you start in 605 BC, then it's just shy of seventy years later that Cyrus makes his decree. The other option is to note the seventy years as concluding with the reconstruction of the temple. You see, even though the first group returned in 538 BC, it took until 516 BC to see the temple constructed. And if you then note that the exile began in 586 BC and the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, then that's seventy years. So, I'm not sure precisely how the Lord is dating this, but there are two possibilities that both work, and each would show that the Lord is sovereignly fulfilling his promises. But now let's get back to the main point.

Brothers and sisters, this picture of our sovereign God fulfilling his promises is our only hope in life. If this is not who our God is (sovereign) and if this is not what he does (fulfill his promises), then we are a hopeless people who are to be pitied. If this were not who our God is, then we'd be naïve in thinking that he's working all for our good, will reward us at the resurrection, is bringing to us our final salvation, and is going to allow death merely to usher us into life. If God isn't sovereign and doesn't fulfill his promises, all of these promises we hold to are mere dreams at best. It takes a sovereign and faithful God if we're going to have hope in him.² But he *is* sovereign and he *does* fulfill his promises (as this text reminds us), and so we can hope and rest in him. As we continue to move through the story, next, we will note that God provides for every need.

God provides for every need

These points obviously overlap in that we've already seen that God provides for the fulfilling of his promise by stirring up Cyrus's heart to make the decree and a group of Israelites to make the trek back to Jerusalem. But I want to show you in even greater detail how the Lord provides for every need to bring about the reconstruction and operation of the temple.

Now, before seeing these details, think of the situation just a year prior to these events. Imagine you're an Israelite, in Babylonian captivity. Then imagine that I, a fellow Israelite, brought up the idea of the temple back in Jerusalem being rebuilt, you could very well point out just how impossible this would be. I mean, first, you'd have to be free to leave Babylon. Then, even if you were free a people, a sizable enough group to pull off the task of rebuilding the temple would have to be willing to go. Then, even if they were willing to go, they're broke. I mean, they're slaves. So even if you were granted freedom to go, and even if people went, you'd still have to figure out a way to have the materials to construct the temple, which was made up of silver, gold, and all kinds of precious materials. Then, you'd need enough materials not only to reconstruct the temple but you'd need to furnish the temple with vessels of silver and gold that Nebuchadnezzar had hauled off to Babylon in the exile. And, then, even if you had all of that, you'd have to have a very strategic group of people willing to pick up their lives travel back to this city of ruins. You'd need Levites, priests, and temple servants because the Lord only allowed a select group of people to carry out the work of the temple. In other news, if we'd had that conversation a year before the events of Ezra 1, you'd probably be telling me how utterly impossible this would be.

In light of that, then, note what the Lord does. The Persians defeat the Babylonians. Cyrus makes the decree that Jews can go back home to build the temple. And a group are willing to go. In fact, according to Ezra 2:64, a group of 42,360 go. So, that checks a few boxes. But what about the materials that it would take to rebuild the temple? Well, look at 1:4. As Cyrus

² And I'll also add as a side note, if we don't have a God who can stir people's hearts so that people do exactly what he wants them to do while also doing what they most want to do, then we can't have an inerrant Bible.

continues his decree, he declares, “And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Okay, so at this point, we might say that what felt impossible is getting closer. The Jews are free to go back, a sizeable enough portion to rebuild the temple agree to go, and they’ll have materials to rebuild the temple. But, again, it’s one thing to rebuild the temple, which looks like it could now be possible, but what about furnishing it? Remember, all the vessels from the temple had been taken in exile. Well, note what happens in 1:7. We read, “Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.” Then, after noting how great they were in verses 8-11b, we’re told in the last half of verse 11, “All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.”

Now, one more seemingly impossible item is checked. But let’s pause here a second and ask a question. Why did the author write “Babylonia” in verse 11? Did you see that? I mean, Babylon is defeated. This is now considered the empire of Persia. That’s the setting from the start of this book. So why write “Babylonia”? I think he’s using this language to remind us that this very thing had been promised by the Lord years earlier when Jeremiah proclaimed in Jeremiah 27:21-22, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the LORD. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.” You see, the Lord had planned out all the details even way back then. But that’s not all.

I mean, in our list of seemingly impossible things that need to happen, you still have to have people not only to rebuild the temple but to serve in it because not everyone is allowed to. You need Levites, priests, and temple servants. Now, I know that Ezra 2 is one of those chapters that we—at best—skim over in our Bible reading. But that chapter tells us not only that thousands of people came back (i.e. enough to rebuild the temple), but it specifically tells us in verse 36 that priests came, in verse 40 that Levites came, and in verse 43 that temple servants came.

What would have felt seemingly impossible at one point—the Israelites coming back, being able to rebuild the temple, and being able to worship there—the Lord brought about, meeting every single detail needed to make it happen. That’s who our God is.

Now, I want us to linger here for a bit. We’ve noted two truths that scream at us from these opening two chapters of Ezra, namely, that God sovereignly fulfills his promises and provides for every need to bring them about. I’m not saying as we see these truths in these two chapters, “Look at how exceptionally God acted here!” I’m saying that this is who our God is. He is the sovereign one, exercising control over every atom in the universe. He is one who fulfills his promises without exception. And he’s one who provides for every tiny detail in order to bring about his purposes. If we wanted to spend the day looking at this, we could see how he did this in terms of bringing about Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection; how he enabled the church

to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth; and more. But right now I'll simply declare that the God of Ezra 1-2 is the God of the Bible and the God of human history. This is who he is.

So, this morning, I want us to rest in that and trust in him. Take where you are now. Are there things that you're trying to trust God in the midst of, but it seems impossible? Our sovereign God will fulfill every promise he's made in the Scripture. And one of those promises is that he withholds no good thing from his children (Ps 84:11). Moreover, he knows every detail that needs to be accounted for, and he can make it happen. If he purposes you to be married and you're single, there's nothing in the universe that can thwart him from carrying out his purposes for your life and accounting for every detail along the way. If he wants you to be able to make ends meet, or pay for school, or what have you, there's nothing that he needs to make that happen, and there's no necessary detail that he's overlooking.

So the call for us is to trust him and obey him. He's revealed to us what we need to know and do. Just read the Bible and obey his commands. It's not for us to be able to figure out how he'll provide every good thing he's purposed for us in this life any more than it would have been necessary for an Israelite in exile to be able to spell out every detail of how the Lord was going to restore the temple. The secret things belong to him. What he's revealed to us is a call to trust and obey, and why wouldn't we in light of the fact that he's already meet our greatest need and accomplished what is necessary for our greatest good in sending his Son to live, die, and be raised for us? So let's trust him now and declare our trust in him as we come to the table. Amen.