

A Journey Through Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra 1-2: The First Return

We are continuing our journey through Ezra and Nehemiah. Come with us on a quickstep through Ezra 1 & 2!

The Big Picture:

In Ezra 1-2 we're told of King Cyrus's decree that all the people of Judah are to be released from exile and are allowed to return and rebuild God's house in Jerusalem. Gifts and provisions are given and the stolen treasures from the temple were returned and restored to their proper place. The returning exiles (listed in chapter 2) carried this precious cargo home.

So, we know that the first two chapters of Ezra tell the story of King Cyrus releasing God's people from exile so they can return to Judah and Jerusalem. However, there's more to this story. This is about God's faithfulness. God is being faithful to His Word and is acting on behalf of His people. God's stirring up of King Cyrus to make this decree fulfilled God's Word, God's promises and reveals His intentions to preserve His people. This surety of God's Word supplies and cements a foundation of faith in God and a hope for the final fulfilment of all His promises.

This was an act of grace by God – through the actions of King Cyrus – that the people did not deserve. This was an unexpected gift of grace and mercy. They were captives, exiles, being set free. The people would have never have had the opportunity to rebuild the temple and the city without the redemptive action of God through this foreign, 'heathen' king. We can see here that God can use anybody and anything to work out His purposes.

Have a read through 2 Chronicles 36 and Ezra 1&2:

2 Chronicles 36 tells us that the people '*kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets (v16).*' They do so until the wrath of God '*became so great that there was no remedy (v16).*' God brought up the enemy – the Chaldeans – who killed and destroyed everything in their path. Many within Jerusalem were slaughtered, the temple was destroyed and its treasures plundered. Those who had not been killed were brought into captivity in Babylon. The land of Judah lay desolate for 70 years, fulfilling and making up for all its neglected Sabbaths (as was prophesied in Jeremiah 25).

Think about Ezra 1:1-5:

God stirs up the spirits of many people – King Cyrus; the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin; the priests and the Levites. He stirs the hearts and spirits of the highest and the lowliest in the land. God has plans for each and every one of them. What does this stirring up lead to? King Cyrus is moved to decrees the exiles be allowed home and leaders of the people are moved with the desire to rebuild that which has been destroyed – the Temple of the Lord.

The Father we worship is a Sovereign God. He is a God who works in, stirs and moves the hearts of us all, no matter who we are. We often find that He uses those we least expect.

Lists, Lists, Lists:

I don't know about you, but sometimes I'm tempted to 'skip' lists like this in the Bible. It's just a simple list of names and objects isn't it? Nothing too important ...

However, we shouldn't neglect the importance of these lists here in Ezra 1 & 2.

Every article of gold and silver mentioned was precious. They were extremely valuable, not just in terms of material worth but also in their symbolic worth to the people. The restoration of these items to the temple of the Lord would have reflected the restoration of the people to their homeland and their rightful place. The return of these objects would have symbolised fulfilled hopes and promises.

Every person mentioned was precious too. Each one was one of God's called-out people. Through them He was working out His plan of redemption. Ezra lists each of them as the 'survivors;' those who God has preserved through the dispersion of the exile. They might be a tiny remnant but they are a remnant in which the seed of the church is ready to be sown. Within this remnant God reveals His plan to redeem a people for Himself through His Son.

This long list of people and families points to our own place in God's redemptive and salvific story. The Bible traces God's covenant people from Abraham's descendants; through to the generations of those from whom the promised seed would come; through to the line of David; through to Jesus Christ Himself. We are of this line, of the descendants of Abraham, not by birth but by *faith*. We, as followers and lovers of Jesus, are God's treasured possessions, His 'called-out' people.

Some questions for reflection:

1. *How does God stir up our spirit within us today?*
2. *What does Galatians 3:7-9 and 1 Peter 2:9-10 tell us about our place in the family of God?*
3. *The exiles were captives set free by the will of God through the decree of King Cyrus. When Jesus Christ came He accomplished what was foreshadowed in the release and deliverance of the exiles. He came to proclaim 'liberty to the captives.' Read Isaiah 61:1, John 8:34-36, Romans 8:1-2. What do these passages have to say to you today?*

Feel free to get in touch to share what you have learned and what you have been reflecting on during our study. You can email Mark at revmarkmccconnell@gmail.com and/or Emma at revemaycarson@gmail.com.