

## Ezra Ch 1

The book of Ezra picks up some 70 yrs into Israel's history after the southern kingdom of Judah was carried away into captivity by the Babylonian empire. You recall last week as we finished up the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, after a couple of previous deportations into Babylon (the 1<sup>st</sup> in which Daniel was taken, the 2<sup>nd</sup> in which Ezekiel was taken) Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's army finally took and destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, any house that was even sort of nice, and he carried off the remnant that was left into Babylon. Now there were a select few who were left, but they rebelled against the power that Nebuchadnezzar had left over them, assassinated Gedaliah and fled into Egypt. Now for 70 yrs the story lay pretty much silent, but God had (through the prophet Jeremiah) assured them that in 70 yrs He'd visit them again and that they'd be released from captivity and free to rebuild and restore Jerusalem, their temple and the city walls.

So in this time period the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther all take place, as a matter of fact in the Hebrew canon Ezra and Nehemiah are one book, they were contemporaries, Ezra deals with the rebuilding of the temple *in* Jerusalem, Nehemiah the rebuilding of the walls *around* Jerusalem. In other words when you get to the book of Ezra you've entered into that period of time that God's judgment upon the nation had been meted out and the time of their release is at hand.

Now why were they taken off into captivity in the 1<sup>st</sup> place? 2 Reasons, 1<sup>st</sup> of all they as a nation had a tendency towards idolatry; they provoked the Lord to anger by serving other gods which in reality weren't gods at all. And the Lord decided to give them their fill, you remember when they were in the wilderness wanderings and they were all sick of the manna and wanted meat and so God said, "Fine, you want meat, I'll give you meat until it's coming out your nostrils." And I don't know about you, but meat doesn't ever come out of my nostrils unless I'm throwing up, so we're talking here about the people just being sick of it, inundated, saturated until they just didn't want it any more. Well here they are seeking after idols, provoking the Lord, desiring to serve other gods and all. So the Lord says, "Fine, you want to serve other gods, serve them till you're sick of them." And He sends them off into captivity into Babylon, the very seat of false religion and idolatry and during this 70 yr period they're cured of their idolatrous bent. Never again after the Babylonian captivity did Israel slide again into idolatry, they'd had their fill so to speak. What does that mean to you and me? It means that sometimes if we want something bad enough and we're pushing for it hard enough and unrelentingly enough that the Lord just may give it to us even though it might in many ways make for our own destruction. You remember in the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians how that there was a situation in the church where a guy was actually sleeping with his step mom, and Paul said, "What are you guys doing even tolerating this?" He said, "...*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*" 1 Cor 5:5 In other words, if the guy is that bent towards sin, refuses to repent, don't *tolerate* him, *excommunicate* him, give him over to the desires of his own flesh, deliver him to Satan that his flesh might be destroyed so that in the end his spirit might be saved.

Or to understand it another way, “Send him out, it only takes a little leaven to leaven the whole lump and lest you be defiled you need to just send him down the road. But the desire is that he would party it up until he pukes (sort of a deal) that he would come to the realization of the destructive nature of his lifestyle that he might repent and be saved.” And sometimes that needs to happen, the Lord allows one of His own to be turned over to Satan, so that the flesh might be eaten up, but the desired end is for the spirit to be saved, that they might come to their senses and repent.

So understand that the ultimate aim is never simply excommunication, but rather restoration, that they might be saved. And in the case of the fella mentioned in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor that’s exactly what happened, he realized the futility of his own ways and repented. Here in like manner, after 70 yrs in Babylon they were sick of all the idolatry and the futility therein. They’d been “cured” so to speak of their idolatrous disease. And sometimes people have to go through some pretty serious slavery to their sin in order to be sick of it to the extent that they’re ready to be done with it.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing that the Lord had against them was the disobedience to His word where the law had said that every 7<sup>th</sup> yr the land was to enjoy a Sabbath year’s rest. 490 yrs had gone by and they’d never honored that once, so God said that they would be in captivity one year for every Sabbath year they owed the land and that was 70 yrs. And the point in that is that God *will* have rendered *unto* Him that which rightfully belongs *to* Him, there’s no getting around the word of God and it’s application to our lives, it’s an absolute. You and I will never out maneuver God, or manipulate the truisms of the *Word* of God. So the 2 reasons they were in Babylon was #1 They *served* idols, and #2 They sought to *circumvent* the law. And from that we learn that placing other things before God, trying to out maneuver the Word of God is to invite the chastening *hand* of God upon our lives, and the bible says, “*Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*” Heb 12:11. And that’s what we have happening here, the heavy hand of God’s chastening has been upon the nation for 70 yrs, but in the end it’s beginning to yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who’ve been trained by it. So to with you, so to with me, as we learned last week it’s never good to kick against the grain of God’s discipline, better to simply follow the flow, learn and grow because to fight *against* it is to only invite *more* of it.

Well, historically speaking the latest thing to happen in Babylon at this point has been its fall; Darius the Mede has taken it. And thus the “Medo-Persian” empire that you learned about in your history class in high school is at this time the global superpower. We spoke briefly last week about Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson Belshazzar having that party and taking out the vessels of the temple of the Lord, and as they were praising the gods of silver and gold and getting drunk, a hand appeared and started writing on the wall. And his loins were loosed, and the writing read, “Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin” And the king was desperate to find out what it meant, so eventually they got Daniel on the scene and he interpreted the writing for him.

And he said this is what it means, “God has #’d your kingdom and finished it, you’ve been weighed in the balances and found wanting, your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and to the Persians. And that very night Darius the Mede took it, now he really loved Daniel, and from ch 5 on there for a ways you can read of some of the things that took place in that time period (Daniel and the lions den, Daniel started getting these radical visions and all) and in ch 9 Daniel is found reading the book of Jeremiah. We’ll speak more on that in just a second, but I wanted you to be aware that as the book opens up here with the mention of Cyrus, King of Persia, that you knew what was happening so that you don’t think, “Persia? I thought they were in Babylon?” They were, but the Medo-Persian empire has taken it.

Now the book of Ezra divides into 2 parts, as it opens up Ezra isn’t even alive yet, it’ll be another 60 yrs or so before he’s born. But the 1<sup>st</sup> part ch’s 1-6 deal with the *restoration* of the temple under Zerubbabel, the 2<sup>nd</sup> part ch’s 7-10 deal with the *reformation* of the people under Ezra himself. There’s a releasing of the people, a rebuilding of the temple and then a revival that takes place.

Vs1-4

So Cyrus was the Persian side of the Medo-Persian empire at this point, and Darius the Mede represented the Medes. And when we read that it was the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Cyrus, it’s not speaking of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of his reign period, but rather the 1<sup>st</sup> year of his reign which included Babylon, so we’re talking 538 B.C. Now the Medes and Persians were much more humane than the Babylonians, and the Assyrians when it came to the way they dealt with those whom they conquered. And as to where to Babylonians and Assyrians were into deporting people from their national homeland in order to take from them any remaining fight they might have and do away with their national identity, the Medes and the Persians were more into repatriating people, seeking to gain the support of the people by allowing them to secure their own homeland. And they would have them pray to their gods to seek the Medo Persian gods for long life and prosperity and all that for them.

But we read this letter and we think, “It seems strange enough that Cyrus would liberate the people and even encourage the others to get behind them financially, but how did he know that he was on a divine mission from God?” Another question that comes up is, “Did Cyrus come to know the Lord?” It would seem that the answer to that is “No” but that he respected Israel’s God, just like he did anyone else’s. And I’ll show you one reason I believe that in a moment, but then there’s also secular documents that speak of Cyrus and his homage that he paid to all sort of “gods,” so the God of Israel was just One of the many he tried to be on the good side of.

Now the short answer as to why he did this is given in vs 1, “That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.” We read in Jer 25:12 “*Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD; and I will make it a perpetual desolation.*”

And again in Jer 29:10-14 “*For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.*” So you see the desired end in God’s heart was never the *eradication* of the nation, but rather the *restoration*, just like with you and with me. But that’s *why* this happened, to fulfill the Word of God, God’s word will never fail, every word that has issued forth from His mouth will accomplish the purpose for which He has sent it.

Now as for *how* God did this, we read here in vs 1 that, “The Lord stirred the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.” Now how do you suppose God stirred his spirit? I personally believe that that’s where our good friend Daniel comes into the picture. I mentioned to you just a bit ago that in Daniel ch 9 you find him reading through and studying the book of Jeremiah, and Jeremiah records the dates of the captivity, the specific mention of the 70 yrs and from that he was able to deduce the fact that their time of captivity was all but up. Now what did that do to him? It drove him to his knees in prayer; he put on sackcloth, sat in ashes, and began to intercede for the nation. Now Daniel was an incredibly godly man, yet he didn’t commend himself and criticize the nation, he just said, “Oh God we’ve sinned against You,” and he included himself in the overall condition of what the nation had been. He humbled himself before the Lord, and sought the Lord as One who is merciful and gracious who keeps His covenant and is true to His Word.

And he says, “O God Your sanctuary is desolate,” and he begins to seek the Lord to hear, and forgive, and to act and he says, “...we don’t present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies.” And he’s beseeching God that in accordance with His Word, and for His names sake that He might accomplish His purposes. Now one might ask, “What’s the point of prayer? If God is going to accomplish His purposes regardless, than why pray about anything?” But that’s where the beauty of this thing we call a *relationship* with God begins to enter into the equation, because God has chosen to often times cause His purposes to be accomplished through the vehicle of our prayers. In other words prayer, and the purposes of God are like hand in glove, they go together. And whenever God is preparing to move forward with His purposes, you’ll find that someone, or some people somewhere are being stirred up and moved to pray by the Spirit of God and/or the promises of His Word. Daniel was studying the word, saw that they were in that season whereby the fulfillment of God’s was upon them, he began to get on his face and seek the Lord, beseech the Lord, intercede for the nation before the Lord, and God began to move.

Plus I'd imagine that when Daniel heard the name "Cyrus" as being on the throne in Persia, that really began to excite him. Why is that? (And you guys this is just another reason why it pays to be a student of the Word of God) Daniel was a man of the scripture, and because of that he saw the clues coming together, he knew the time was up, and he knew the right man was on the throne. You see over 150 yrs earlier, the Lord had given His Word by the mouth of Isaiah had prophet about this very thing, turn quickly to Isaiah Ch 44 (Vs24-28).

Isn't that amazing!? God called Cyrus out by name over 150 yrs before he was even born, just like the man of God called Josiah by name over 300yrs before he was born back in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 13. What does that tell you? That before you were formed in the womb God knew you, and has ordained that you should be His own, it tells you that God has a plan prepared for you from before the foundations of the earth that you should walk in it. Now you start thinking about that stuff too long and your head will just explode, but it's incredible. Over 150yrs before Cyrus was even around, God foretold Isaiah of His plan and purpose through Cyrus. What else does that tell you? That God is the One who ordains who it is that rises to power so that His purpose might be accomplished, and that the various governments who are in place are placed there by the Lord. Rom 13:1-2, *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves."* Read on in Ch 45 Vs 1-6

And this is one of the reasons that I don't think Cyrus knew the Lord, because the Lord says plainly in vs 4, "I have named you, though you have *not known Me.*" But the general consensus is that Daniel brought these things to the attention of Cyrus the king of Persia and when he saw his name in scripture prewritten 150 +yrs prior to his time, and heard of what God wanted him to do, that he was "stirred." That's where he got the word about God's command to him that we read in vs 2.

Now, real quick a couple of more things to see before we move on and 1 is this, though the King *was* commanded, the people weren't, there was to be nothing "legal" or enforced upon them to make the move. It was to be a freewill decision, the result of grace working in their soul, leading them to their homeland. There was really no logical reason for them to go back, they were treated pretty good in Babylon materially/economically speaking, the city was in ruins, burned to the ground and torn apart, but it was the only place delegated where they could make sacrifice, the only city where God had put His name.

And so it wasn't for material reasons they went, but rather that they might draw *near* to God, walk in *obedience* to God. But what I wanted you to see is that the people were to go willingly, not legally, because anytime there's a drawing near to God, or a genuine move of God, it comes through the vehicle of the grace of God moving on the hearts of the people, if you try to force the matter, or make it a "legal" issue, it kills it. But if you just draw near to God, because of a love for God, and a desire to walk intimately with God, then you have something special other than that it's just a legal program.

The other thing I wanted you to see is that of those who didn't go, or perhaps couldn't go for whatever reason, they were to get behind those who were going, they were to help with silver, gold, goods, livestock, and a freewill offering over and above that. And of course this is reminiscent of their deliverance from Egypt where they were given goods, gold, supplies and all that for the journey.

But the idea here is that perhaps you're unable to get involved in the ministry, or head out into the mission field for whatever reason, but God would have us to get behind those who do/those who are. By praying intently, giving generously, keeping those who are on the frontlines in supply. Long story short, David and his men pursuing the Amalekites, some of them too tired to go on, so they off loaded all the supplies, some stayed with the supplies the others took care of the job. But when they got back, some of those who did the work told the guys who guarded the supplies that they weren't going to get any share in the spoil, David said, "Hold up, it doesn't work that way." And He said, "*...as his part is who goes down to the battle, so shall his part be who stays by the supplies; they shall share alike.*" So it was, from that day forward; he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel to this day." 1 Sam 30:24-25 Which is simply to say that maybe you can't be on the frontlines for whatever reason, but by keeping guard over the supplies and making sure those are out there stay *in* supply, you'll receive the same reward as though you were right there yourself doing the work. Now to me that's pretty awesome, so if they didn't go, they were to give, and after they gave what they were more or less required to, they could give above that anything they *desired* to.

#### Vs5-6

This is just another practical picture of the principle of where God guides, God provides, the temple was to be built, and God loaded them up for the work, and the people gave willingly. Now we have a building project going on right now that it would be real easy for me to ride this wave out, but I'm not going to. Just see that, they gave willingly, they gave generously, because they were behind the work that God was doing. Now I'm real sorry for the way that so many have stained the idea of finances and the work of God. But you need to know that giving willingly and even generously is a legitimate/significant portion of the heart of God and He desires it to be a significant portion of our heart as well. Think of the heart of God and all that He's given us, in the person of His Son... not to mention the food you eat daily, the roof over your head, the clothes on your back, and on and on we could go. We serve a God who gives willingly, and generously, now contrast that with your heart in giving. Paul told the Corinthians, "*He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*" 2 Cor 9:6-7 Now personally I believe that the tithe is grounded biblically even in the NT (though I don't have time to develop that now) what Paul was speaking of here was a freewill offering above the tithe. But regardless of all that the key is found in those words, "... not grudgingly or of necessity, but as is purposed in your heart." In other words if you can't give joyfully, out of the overflow of your love for God because He 1<sup>st</sup> loved you and had given Himself for you, than you should just keep your money.

Because God won't honor it anyway if it's given from guilt, or a feeling of being forced, you see at the bottom line it's not so much *what* we give, as it is *how* we give it. One day Jesus was setting opposite the treasury in the temple, and you read in Mark 12 how that it says that He was observing *how* the people were giving, not *what* they were giving, but how they were giving it. For show, out of pomp and pride, out of guilt, constrained and forced, or just from the joy of their heart, being stoked that God would somehow allow them to invest in the practical purposes of His kingdom knowing that it would gain them an eternal reward. God is always interested in the motive of our heart, even in our giving. And we note here that what they did, they did willingly, and I'm sure they did it all willingly. You don't begrudge a certain amount and then desire to give above that willingly, if you're not wanting to kick down 10%, you're sure not happy about the idea of making an offering willingly above that. Even Cyrus got in on the deal.

### Vs7-11

Real quick, what are we seeing here? The vessels *of* the Lord, being separated *unto* the Lord, for the purpose and service *of* the Lord, they're being set apart from other resources or perhaps pagan vessels or objects of worship, and they're being facilitated for the worship services and purposes of God. And as you know that's exactly who we are, you've been called out from among the world, in the world, not of the world, but you're a vessel that's been, and is to *be* separated from the things of this world, separated from the profane and given over to God's purposes and His pursuits for your life. What fellowship has light with darkness, the temple of God with the temple of idols, the believer with the unbeliever? *“Come out from among them, And be separate,” says the Lord. ‘Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.’”* 2 Cor 6:17-18 Paul told Timothy, *“But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.”* 2 Tim 2:20-21 The choice is yours, but it's God's desire to set you apart as a vessel of honor, cleansed from the unclean, pure of the profane, that you might be sanctified and useful for the purposes of the Master, prepared for every good work.

Prayer Points: God we want to be used by You, for the glory and exaltation of Your name, Lord purify us of the profane, cleanse us of the unclean, teach us what it means to lead lives of purity, to be separate unto You. Lord give us Your heart, even when it comes to giving of ourselves, our resources or whatever, that we would be those who reflect You in our giving to You. Lord would you give us a heart that seeks after You, that we would be a people of prayer, in line with your purposes, in stride with Your Spirit. Thank You that we can trust in Your word and if You say it, You'll surely bring it to pass, You've said that if You go away, You'll come again and receive unto Yourself that where You are, there we may be also, Lord we believe it. So again, help us to be separated unto You for whatever service or purpose You

desire that we offer to You. Would You continue to teach through the book of Ezra and Nehemiah what You'd have us to learn, give us ears to hear.