

Bibles???

The Word of God is the Absolute Truth and the Final Authority

This evening we are going to start a new book.

The book of Ezra –

The book of Ezra is a historical book.

Along with the book of Nehemiah, they provide us with a historical account of how the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem following the seventy years they spent in captivity.

The book of Ezra is going to deal primarily with the rebuilding of the temple, while Nehemiah deals with the rebuilding of the wall around the city of Jerusalem.

The book of Ezra is divided nicely in two parts, chapter one through chapter six is going to involve the ministry of a man by the name of Zerubbabel – he was a descendant of King David

In chapters 7-10, we are going to see the ministry of Ezra – he was a descendant of Aaron the priest.

The theme of the book of Ezra is **restoration**.

Let's pray...

Turn with me to the book of 2 Chronicles 36,

[2Ch 36:15-23 NKJV] 15 And the LORD God of their fathers sent [warnings] to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending [them], because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. 16 But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till [there was] no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave [them] all into his hand. 18 And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all [these] he took to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. 20 And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. 22 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 throughout all his kingdom, and also [put it] in writing, saying, 23 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 the LORD his God [be] with him, and let him go up!

Let's see if you remember, why did the Jews have to spend 70 years in exile in Babylon? There were two reasons.

1. Idolatry – they started worshipping other gods.
2. Greed - they failed to keep the Sabbath for 490 years. Remember they were only allowed to work the land for six years and then they were supposed to let it rest on the seventh year. They were supposed to trust God for provisions during that year – but they didn't.

The 490 years is important because it provides for us a prolonged period, involving generation after generation continuing to commit the same sin.

For 490 years, the Jews sowed to the flesh.

And each generation thought they were going to get away with it –

Until God raised Babylon to discipline His people.

Through a series of three sieges, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, destroyed the city and took captives back to Babylon.

So this judgment upon the Jews was based upon them sowing to the flesh.

They sowed to the flesh – they wanted to worship other gods. They wanted to be like the nations around them – God handed them over to the nations around them.

The same things happens in the life of the believer,

Sometimes we go through periods where we sow to the flesh.

We tend to think that we are getting away with it – but in reality, we are not.

If there is no repentance, there will be a time of correction that we will have to endure – just like the time the Jews spent in exile.

Sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking that since we are going through such a bad time, that the quicker it's over the better.

However, we must remember that it will be over when God says it's over.

And we have to remember that God's decision is based on His love and good plans for us, not our comfort.

And this is what we have here in the book of Ezra –

[Ezr 1:1-11 NKJV] 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 throughout all his kingdom, and also [put it] in writing, saying, 2 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.

Here in verse one, we have Cyrus the King of Persia.

And it just so happens that when Cyrus conquers Babylon – the 70 years that the Jews were supposed to be in exile have been fulfilled.

Now, I asked you to make a note that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia – because the proclamation that Cyrus makes – it doesn't come from the kindness of his heart.

Cyrus was not a believer.

However, as he conquered Babylon, Daniel – because he worked in the royal court, he had the opportunity to show Cyrus the words that Isaiah had written 150 years before concerning him and even using his name.

Turn with me to Isaiah 44

[Isa 44:28 NKJV] 28 Who 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." '

Here in verse 44, the Lord is telling Isaiah that this individual Cyrus is going to be the one that is going to issue the proclamation.

And then in the next chapter, He tells Isaiah not only that Cyrus is going to conquer Babylon but also how he was going to do it.

[Isa 45:1 NKJV] 1 "Thus says the LORD to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held--To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut:

So the Lord stirred up Cyrus in the same way He stirs us up – through His word.

3 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.

During this time, it was estimated that there were approximately 2 million Jews living in Babylon –

Cyrus' proclamation was allowing all the Jews to return home and rebuild the temple –

Out of the two million Jews, only 50,000 decide to go back.

If my math is correct, that is about 2.5% of the Jews that respond to the proclamation.

The remaining Jews were too comfortable living in Babylon to go back to Jerusalem.

They no longer wanted to be part of the work that God was going to do.

Turn with me to Isaiah 10

4 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.

For those that chose not to return to Jerusalem, Cyrus proclaims that it is their responsibility to provide for those had made the decision to return.

5 Then the heads of the fathers' [houses] of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which [is] in Jerusalem.

Not only did the Lord stir Cyrus, He also stirred the leaders within the tribes as well as the priests.

Church, we have to remember that this is the way the Lord still works.

He stirs the spirit.

Many times, we don't do the things God has called us to do because we feel that they are too hard, there are just too many obstacles in front of us, or maybe we don't do them because we just don't know how it's going to get done.

These leaders of tribes of Judah and Benjamin, they didn't know what awaited them in Jerusalem.

The journey back to Jerusalem was a long and dangerous journey.

They were returning to a city in ruins with no homes.

They didn't know how they were going to get the materials to rebuild.

However, it was the stirring of the spirit that moved them to return to Jerusalem.

Turn to Phil 2,

[Phi 2:13 NKJV] 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for [His] good pleasure.

Highlight this verse – because it is God who first gives us the will – then He gives us the power – then He provides the way for us to carry out that which He stirred up in us.

If God is calling us to do something, He will provide us with the path and resources to get it done. Our job is to be obedient to His calling.

6 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.

So those that remained in Babylon, they provided encouragement by helping support the rebuilding of the temple.

Not only did they provide material things, they also provided livestock – once the temple was erected, they were going to need animals to sacrifice.

However, the important thing here is that they gave willingly – not grudgingly. They didn't give because they felt compelled to give, they gave because they wanted to give. This is what is meant to be a cheerful giver.

7 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;

When Nebuchadnezzar went into Jerusalem, he took certain articles from the temple.

You might remember that when we studied the book of Daniel, it was his grandson, Belshazzar in Daniel 6, who decides to use some of the articles during one of his drunken parties.

Belshazzar doesn't survive but the temple vessels did.

8 and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

Sheshbazzar is the Babylonian name for Zerubbabel.

9 This [is] the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, 10 thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar [kind, and] one thousand other articles. 11 All the articles of gold and silver [were] five thousand four hundred. All [these] Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The articles themselves are not the point.

The point is that they were being returned, put back where to where they belonged.

They would again be used in worship, rather than simply being on display in a pagan temple, or used for secular purposes.

So now, here in chapter two – we get the names of the people that returned to Jerusalem.

[Ezr 2:1 NKJV] 1 Now these [are] the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his [own] city.

If one was to take an airplane from modern day Babylon to Jerusalem – it is about 520 miles.

Back in those days, people traveled along the rivers – not in a straight line – so it was a journey of about 900 miles, and later on in the book of Ezra, we will see that it takes Ezra about 4 months to complete the journey.

[Ezr 2:2 NKJV] 2 [Those] who came with Zerubbabel [were] Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, [and] Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

The Nehemiah that is mentioned here is not the same Nehemiah from the book of Nehemiah.

Also, the Mordacai that is listed here is not the same Mordacai from the book of Esther.

From verse 3 to verse 20 we have the number of people that came by family, from verse 23-35 we have the number of people that returned to their original home towns and from verse 36 to 58 we have the number of people that returned that were temple workers.

I am not going to read through all the names –

However, I want to draw your attention to verse 58, when it mentions the Nethinim.

The Nethinim were descendants of the Gibeonites.

When we studied the book of Joshua, the Gibeonites were the ones that lied to Joshua and made a treaty with him.

They were the ones that showed up in old clothes and stale bread and told Joshua that they had come from far away so they were no threat to the Hebrews – Joshua made the treaty with them – not to kill them and then finds out that they lived up the road from where they were so he forces them to work in the temple carrying water.

From verse 59-63, we have a list of undocumented priests.

In order to explain, turn with me to Num 3

[Num 3:5-10 NKJV] 5 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 6 "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. 7 "And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. 8 "Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. 9 "And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they [are] given entirely to him from among the children of Israel. 10 "So you shall appoint **Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death."**

The Law of Moses made it clear that in order to be a priest, one had to be a descendant of Aaron.

Because the Jews had been in exile for 70 years, papers were lost, families were separated – so if a person claimed to be a priest but could not prove a genealogical connection to Aaron, they were not allowed to participate in the work of the priesthood and they could not share in the payments made to the priesthood.

[Ezr 2:62-63 NKJV] 62 These sought their listing [among] those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they [were excluded] from the priesthood as defiled. 63 And the governor said to them that they

should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim.

So what Zerubbabel does here in verse 64, is that he leaves it up to God.

Because God is all knowing, God was going to decide if the undocumented priests were truly priests by using the Urim and Thummin.

This Urim and Thummin was something connected to this breast plate or apron that the High Priest wore and they were able to discern the will of God.

Some people think that it may have been a white and a black stone – so the priest would ask a “yes” or “no” question and based upon which one they pulled out, they would be able to discern His will.

We need to remember that our goal should always be to find out what God wants.

These people were unsure of what to do, so they asked God for answers.

Whatever the Urim and Thummin were, there were apparently a means of understanding God's direction.

They were going to wait until God said what to do about these folks.

Zerubbabel didn't let these people push their way into the priesthood simply because they wanted in.

He was willing to wait and find out what God thought.

He also didn't automatically exclude them from the priesthood just because he didn't have a good idea of what was right.

[Ezr 2:64-70 NKJV] 64 The whole assembly together [was] forty-two thousand three hundred [and] sixty, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom [there were] seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred men and women singers. 66 Their horses [were] seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five, 67 their camels four hundred and thirty-five, and [their] donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty. 68 [Some] of the heads of the fathers' [houses], when they came to the house of the LORD which [is] in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place: 69 According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly garments. 70 So the priests and the Levites, [some] of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

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