

Today we are starting a new series. It is in Ezra. I encourage you to open your Bibles to Ezra 1:1-10.

*(1:1) “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: (1:2) ‘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. (1:3) 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. (1:4) 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.’ (1:5) Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. (1:6) And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. (1:7) 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. (1:8) Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. (1:9) And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; (1:10) all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.”*

I don’t know how familiar you are with Ezra and Nehemiah. It is a great story, very dramatic. But someone might ask this question: “Why do a study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.” Why have I done this at this particular time? My first answer to such a question would simply be to make reference to that great verse in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. How many verses in scripture are of no worth? None! The affirmation in scripture is, “*All scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.*” So literally I feel total freedom to turn anyplace in the Bible and say, “We are going to study that, because it is profitable in all its parts.”

But there is a more particular reason for turning and looking at these particular verses. The substance of these two books has to do with the re-establishment and then the rebuilding first of the temple, which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, and then there would be a rebuilding of the city itself and its walls, that will be by Nehemiah. But if we read and are thoughtful about what we are reading and put it against the background of God’s larger purposes, I think we will come to understand that what God wants is He wants to have an entire way of life recreated. He wants to rebuild a way of life that is centered on the worship of God. Who was to do this? The work was to be done, as we read in the fifth verse, by those who were moved in heart to do it. Verse 5 says, “*Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.*” We would say that these are the ones who were effectually called by God to be His servants.

I think Ezra’s account makes it very clear that the work was to be done by the leaders, the restored priests, the prophets, and the people as a whole. In other words, no one was to be left out of the work.

Again verse 5, *“Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites...”* As we read through these two books – in the Hebrew Bible they are one book, which how we should read them, they are a continuous story – we recognize that in order to accomplish God’s purpose they are going to have to persevere. They are going to have to persevere through external opposition and internal resistance and corruption. So what do we see here? [We see] that God wants to re-establish not just a place of worship, not just a city that houses the temple, but to rebuild a way of life which is focused upon this temple in the middle of the city. He wants to rebuild a way of life that is worship centered. Who is going to do it? It will be those whom God has called, those whom God has stirred in their hearts. Who will they include? [It will be] people of every sort.

The last thing we would note at the outset is that this work is going to require the continual and extensive teaching of the word of God. When Ezra arrives, which he does about 18 years after the first group [of returning exiles], he arrives with the word of God and the first thing he does he has the assembly come together and he has a full day’s worth of reading the word of God. A little later on when the time has come for rebuilding the city of Jerusalem God calls up two of the minor prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, and they come and they preach to the people. The preach to the people and the leaders.

So what does this have to do with us? I believe we can profitably see some similarities, some parallels if you will between the situation of Israel in exile and us. The United States has never been a Christian nation. We should not allow ourselves to think that way. Why do I say this? We are not the covenant people of God. However, for most of our history we were a nation extensively dominated by a Christian worldview in law, education, morality, anthropology or the study and nature of man, and all of that is gone. It is gone. It is as if we had travelled to Babylon. It can be said of the true church in America today that we are as in the words of Hebrews 11:13, strangers and exiles in our own nation. I mentioned the true church. What do I mean by “the true church”? I mean something rather specific: [it is] the church that remains faithful to the Bible as the sole sufficient authority for faith and life. Those groups which have ceased to believe in the inspired inerrancy and authority of the biblical record, whether in their explicit teaching or in their practice, they are no longer the true church. Like the great majority of the Jews, when given the opportunity to return, so these religious people have made their peace, as it were, with Babylon and they prefer to be embedded in the culture.

You and I both know that churches of America are passing through an extended period in which there has been the conscious and deliberate rejection by what calls itself the church of what were the traditional forms of worship, organizational patterns that define local congregation. How many are old enough to remember responsive readings in the church, recited prayers in the church, the observance of Lent, the observance of Advent, a habit of family devotions, a careful and continuous concern that we would be morally clean according to biblical standards? How many can remember when the primary qualifications for a good recommendation were that you were honest, you had integrity, you knew how to work, you worked hard, you were humble and you were kind? Those [values] are gone. How many can recall that Sunday meant that you worshiped in the morning and in the evening and on Wednesdays you gathered for prayer? That is gone. If you know anything about church history, you know that the church had drifted into a low state of spirituality and much needed to be changed. Don’t take my comments as if all the changes that have occurred are negative. It is not true. But the degree to which renewal has arrived in the church is small compared to the loss of our culture. There was a

day when church attendance and what might be termed Christian respectability were the paradigms for responsible and good living. I am well aware that our entertainment media have mocked those standards to the degree that almost no one in this room would willingly identify with them anymore. Mockery is the cruelest sort of criticism because it by-passes all rational considerations. So we have been lulled into rejecting the religious and righteous practices of our forbearers. There was a day, you might recall, when the church as biblically defined was understood to be the conscience of our nation. This bore its most dramatic fruit in the movement to abolish slavery. I am not current enough in touch with the curriculum taught in schools to know if they still make it clear that it was Christians by and large, committed, dedicated, sacrificially giving Christians that led the entire movement for the abolition of slavery, but it is true. Another tremendous effort carried out by the Christian community was the Civil Rights movement. Even today the church, the true church is acting, seeking to appeal to the conscience of our nation, protesting against the culture of death seen primarily in abortion and increasingly in euthanasia or so called mercy killing. Furthermore the church is attempting to resist the so called sexual revolution and redefining human sexuality, gender definition and marriage. But if you are paying attention you know that the church no longer comes even close to speaking with a united voice in these matters. There are churches so called in our country, many of them, who have endorsed every single aspect on the liberal agenda. So we are left with a mumbling, muttering, unclear voice. Indeed, I believe that in many cases what call themselves churches have now gone so far away from the Word of God that they are no longer able to recognize evil when they see it.

So today we live in a de-Christianized or post Christian culture. Again it is as if we had been deported from where we were to someplace else. There is, in addition to this, a deeply disturbing reality. It is this: predominantly Americans today, including the majority of those who call themselves Christians, see most of these changes in our cultural values and practices as the steady advance of the principles of personal liberty or freedom and equality, and they see this as good. Or, they don't know how to object to it without sounding foolish. We like having the liberty to do what we want when we want to do it with whom we want to do it. Our culture has now reorganized itself around the “self”. It is a self centered life where each self makes up its own mind and determines what it is going to do and has no particular sense of obligation or submission to any external authority. There are many who say that is good Christianity, although no one with a rational mind can read the word of God and possibly come up with that conclusion. Consequently our nation has become deeply irrational.

Thinking about the church in America we might in one sense say that we have taken the advice of Jeremiah 29:4-7 too much to heart and we have lost sight of a second statement by Jeremiah and its importance for our well-being. See Jeremiah 29:10-13. When the Israelites were being hauled off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar as he, God, had promised they would be because of their continual and stubborn disobedience, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles. In that letter he says this:

*“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: [8c] ‘Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.’”*

That was the first section: go there and thrive, build, multiply, become a dynamic community within the context of Babylon. But notice in the second passage Jeremiah says,

*“For thus says the Lord: 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. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when...”* Do you notice that? When is it? [It is when] *“...you seek me with all your heart.”*

Jeremiah 29:10-13 is the call for return and recovery from the exile, a reminder that they were under discipline for massive failure while they were in Babylon. Here is the deal: thrive, multiply, grow, but don't forget that you are in exile because of your stubborn disobedience, and the day will come when I will call you back. How will you know? [It will be] when you seek me with your whole heart.

They are to live in Babylon with the anticipation of a recreation of a God-centered way of life. Most often when I hear reference to “I know the plans I have for you” used by my fellow pastors and Christians [in general] there is no thought of returning to a worship centered life. Those plans are all about building houses, planting gardens, finding spouses and thriving in Babylon. They are not about rebuilding a culture that centers on the worship of God. It is just not there.

What has happened, I believe, in the church is that we desire to be blessed in the city and to be blessed with the blessings that the city can give, and there is no thought of leaving it. We have made our peace with Babylon. Our longing for the Lord and His blessings has faded, our vision of spiritual things has grown dim and so has our hope. Consequently a question confronts us as the people of God. Can we believe that God is calling us with His word just as He called the Israelites? Can we believe that God might actually send a couple of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, calling us to leave off putting personal wealth, security and comforts as well as the career objectives of our children first, so that instead we can concentrate on building the church of God, seeing the churches of God as outposts of the kingdom of God on earth in anticipation of the return of the king?

I think we have come to the point in our surrendering to the age that we figure we will just hang on, we will enjoy Babylon and because we know the secret formulas when Jesus comes back, bamo, we are out of here. [It is] too bad for all the lost ones. We bear no sense of pressing responsibility for the presentation of the gospel in our communities, we do not challenge the unrighteousness in our communities, and we do not in any sense seek to build the church as an alternative way of life within the context of our larger communities. We do not see the church as the outposts of the kingdom of God. We do not see that life within the church is dominated and to be characterized by the passions that are laid out in the New Testament for holiness and righteousness. Our eschatology is escapism.

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*priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. (1:6) And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. (1:7) 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. (1:8) Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. (1:9) And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; (1:10) all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.”*

Let me begin with some observations because some questions arise when we read these passages. One was addressed already in the invocation. I appreciated the reference to the Proverb [stating that the heart of the king is like water in the hands of the Lord; He turns it whichever way He desires]. The first has to do with Cyrus. Cyrus was mentioned by Isaiah in 44:28-45:1. He was the emperor of the Persian Empire, the third, fourth or fifth after Nebuchadnezzar, the man who took [Israel] into exile. He was prophetically named by Isaiah some 200 years before the historical event. This is what Isaiah said, “...who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘she shall be built.’ And of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’” Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed...” The Jews who lived in Babylon, those who would respond to the Spirit of God would have known Isaiah’s words. Think of yourself as one of those Jews, and let’s just say you are in Babylon and [a good friend] comes running up and says, “Do you know what I just heard? You know, we started wondering when Cyrus became the king. Do you know what Cyrus just did? He made a proclamation. We are to go home. It is the words of Isaiah! God is fulfilling His promise.” What do you think that would have done to them? How excited are we about Jesus coming back? How excited do we think these guys were? Fairly excited? Who is in charge, who is running the show, who is sovereign? Who makes Cyrus make such a proclamation? God, it is God. You might take that and stick it over where Ezra blandly writes, “God stirred up their hearts.” Wahoo! “He stirred me up!” Really my sister, I think these are all Presbyterians, they are such staid and respectable people!

There are some things to understand and get straight. Ezra tells us that Cyrus gives the decree in order to satisfy or bring to pass Jeremiah’s prophecy, but I do not think that was in [Cyrus’s] mind. He isn’t saying to himself, “I wonder how I can fulfill Jeremiah’s promise.” That is not what is going on. Ezra knows that. Interestingly this is similar, I think, to what we read in Matthew when he refers to a whole series of prophecies regarding Jesus. This happened in order that... This happened in order that... This happened in order that... Matthew has got the picture. He looks back and he says, “Oh, I see what is going on. God is fulfilling His promises, carrying us forward to the return of the Messiah. We have a window here into the unfolding of God for the salvation of humanity. God is in charge. It is similar, by the way, to Luke’s recording of the prayers of the disciples after they had been released from custody and being interrogated by the Sanhedrin. They had been preaching in the name of Jesus. [The Sanhedrin] said, “Don’t preach in the name of Jesus.” They preached in the name of Jesus anyway. They got thrown in jail. Then they got “thrown” out of jail. Do we remember how they got out of jail? An angel comes and opens the gates. Then they gather together in Acts 4:27-28. There is a little prayer meeting and we have a little quote from that prayer meeting. They are very stirred up in their hearts.

They are stirred up because they are sensing the sovereignty of God. And they say, *“Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel...”* Now here is the key: *“...to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”* So get the picture: here they are, these Christian disciples. They have been thrown in jail, gotten out of jail, they are now gathered in a prayer meeting and they are thinking about what is happening and they are recognizing that whatever is happening is exactly what God has planned. Who is in charge? God is in charge, that is who is in charge. So they are stirred up indeed.

We know that the disciples had been extensively instructed by Jesus before He died. We also know from the scriptures themselves that they understood almost nothing of what they were told. They could not put the matter together. They remained in the darkness. Well we understand why; they did not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the truth was not illuminated for their understanding. After the resurrection you might recall Jesus has a clandestine meeting with a couple of the disciples. He meets up with the disciples that are walking along the road to Emmaus. Jesus does not let them know who He is. He begins talking to them. They think Jesus has just died. He says, are you forgetting what the scripture says? And He proceeds, *“...beginning with Moses and all the prophets and the scriptures concerning himself.”* Then Luke tells us, *“They rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’ And then they told the rest of them what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”* Shall we do a little drama here up on the stage. Shall we imagine these two guys walking in and saying, “I have been stirred! I have been stirred!” (In very quiet tones) You know it was worth the whole day watching Tim trying to talk with only one hand [holding a microphone in the other]. That was wonderful! I suspect that those guys waved both hands and waggled their heads at the same time THEY ARE SO EXCITED! Where are we? Yeah, see? Oh, God is in charge! Enough doom and gloom about the sad direction of our nation. True it is; makes me weep. Keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus Christ, fixed upon the word of God, and listen. Is the Spirit of God calling to us as His people to rebuild the integrity, the dynamic reality of the church as the center of the lives of those who call upon the Lord? Think about it.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank You for the immense privilege, a privilege that we cannot begin to measure, of being your called out children. Effectual calling: Lord we think of those words, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” Oh, Lord, may we by Thy grace be amongst those chosen to fulfill your purposes, to honor and glorify Your name, to indeed be the body of Christ in all that we are. We ask this, our Father, giving thanks in Jesus’ name. Amen