

Cyrus Builds the Temple
(Ezra 1-6)

If we read the Bible to find out what we're supposed to do, we will get frustrated. That's because most of the Bible is *not* telling us what we're supposed to do.

Instructions about how people should live are sprinkled liberally through the Scripture, but much of the Bible has little. So what's the Bible's purpose? The Bible *always* introduces God. The Scripture assumes that we want to know about our God.

The Scripture also hopes that if we're not interested in God, it will be able to entice us and attract us to God. But one way or the other, if there's no actual interest in the living God, in knowing him, then the Bible is not written for us.

In Exodus we read about God leading Israel across the Red Sea. There's little there about what we should do, but there's a lot about what kind of God we have.

Building the Tabernacle takes up at least 12 chapters of Exodus. The Tabernacle was already built by the time Exodus was written. The readers were never supposed to build another tabernacle. Not much about what we should do, lots about what God is like.

I think this is the last sermon in our series on Old Testament turning points. Today we'll learn more about the exiles coming back to Judah, and how the temple was rebuilt.

But the reason for this series, and for every story in the whole Bible, is that we are in relationship with this God. He is our God, and we are his people.

And if the Bible's content shows us what we need to know, *a lot more shows what he's like than shows what to do*. Don't get me wrong: God's people do need to live certain ways because they're his children, and the Bible has this. But what to do and what not to do is *not* the main point, *judging by the Bible's content*. Understanding and knowing God.

The Bible is full of stories about God and people, God and nations, God and churches, God and individuals, God and all kinds of people. And the story of the Bible is not over. The Bible itself says that; we're waiting for more. This means

We are still in that story, we are children of that God, like those people, and those stories are there so that *we* will understand what *our* God is doing in *our* lives. God wants *us* to *know* how he worked with others, so we'll have a better idea of how he works in us.

So we read these stories in the Scripture, and we talk about them, and the God of these stories is here, present, with us, never leaving us, watching and listening, looking from face to face, to see if we're getting it, that the God in *this* Book and the God in *our* lives is all one and the same God. The Bible is written so we'll understand the God in our lives.

And that's why we read OT stories: because, if we can go by what the Bible says, *nothing is more "practical" than knowing more about the God that's always with us*. He wants us to know him, the God that's always working in us, just like he worked in all of them.

This spiel has nothing in particular to do with this sermon. It has to do with every sermon of mine, and it needs to be said especially in OT sermons.

Jeremiah 16:12-15 - God Promised the Exiles' Return before they were exiled!

Jeremiah 16:12-13 is a typical paragraph from the prophets, God promising to punish Israel because of their sin, in particular predicting that he will have them taken prisoner off the land he gave them.

Our real interest is in what comes right *after* vv12-13, but we'll read these first.

[Your ancestors were bad,]¹² But you have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors. See how all of you are following the stubbornness of your evil hearts instead of obeying me.¹³ So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.'

But now see what kind thing God promises immediately after promising this judgment:

¹⁴ "However, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when people will no longer say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,'¹⁵ but they will say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' For I will restore them to the land I gave their ancestors.

Before Judah has gone into exile, God already promises to bring them back. This kind of teaching also occurs here and there throughout Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah 16 is early enough that there is still a chance that if they repent, there will be no judgment at all.

Even at that early stage, in the middle of God's repeated lists of their sins and warnings of the judgment coming, God promises that after the punishment he will restore them.

God in these stories is like a good husband, and Israel is like a wife that has one affair after another, always going after other men. The prophets use that exact image, and God is very upset. But even while he condemns their actions, he gives hope for the future.

People like to quote Jeremiah 29:11 - *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

If you read what else happens in Jeremiah 29, you will see that this is right at the beginning of their time of exile, and those plans of the LORD will not start for a while.

Still, they are warm words, and in the middle of his anger are many kind promises.

Now, let's turn to Ezra 1. Everything so far has been introduction. Now we'll begin.

Ezra 1:1-3 - *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:*

² *"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: " 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of his people among you—may their God be with them, and let them go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.*

In 539 BC, when the Babylonians had ruled for 70 years, they were defeated by the Medes and the Persians. The Medes and Persians did something innovative with the nations they conquered.

The Babylonians, and everyone before them, took the defeated people home with them, and made them servants and slaves, like the Israelites were in Egypt.

But the Medes and Persians, and everyone after, sent all these people back home to live on their own land, and then put heavy taxes on them.

The Medes and Persians gave authority to the priests of all these nations. The Medes and Persian figured that if you kept the priests happy, and gave the priests lots of power, these defeated nations would not cause too much trouble. For the most part it worked.

My point is that Cyrus probably talked like this to other nations as well, and spoke respectfully of their gods as well.

But don't miss the real story. Who is making this all happen? *In order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:*

² *"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: " 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.*

I doubt that Cyrus meant that. But it was true. The main thing that Ezra 1-6 teach about God is that he can do his work through kings and rulers that have no interest in him.

Proverbs 21:1 says: *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.* When you want to drain the water out of a puddle, you dig a ditch, and the water flows where you dig the ditch.

That's how God steers kings, and that's what these chapters of Ezra teach us. The LORD moved the heart of Cyrus to send the exiles home and to have the temple rebuilt.

There is one other thing to notice here: why are the exiles going back to Judah? To go back home? To live on their own land? By this Scripture, no. Cyrus sends them back with a specific task: to build a temple for God in Jerusalem, and worship him there.

They are *not* going back just to be home, to live in Judah again. They're going back to build a temple and to worship God in the city God had chosen. No Jew who still worships other gods will be interested in this, but the worshipers of God will go.

Ezra 3:1-6 - The returned exiles build the altar.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled with one accord in Jerusalem. ² Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices . . . ⁶ On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.

There was some opposition from the people around them, and it scared them, but they built an altar. The seventh month was the month with the day of Atonement, and the most important celebrations, and they were ready to go by the seventh month.

Then they started on the temple.

Ezra 3:10-13 - The Jews build the foundation of the Temple

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

"He is good;

his love toward Israel endures forever."

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

The last Jews to go into captivity had been there a little less than 50 years. So those who had been 10-20 years old when the temple was destroyed were now in their 60s.

They remember Solomon's great temple, and they could tell from the foundation that this temple was tiny and dumpy compared to Solomon's temple. So the old timers wept. Seeing the temple's foundation was happy and sad at the same time, depending on age.

But they all sang that the LORD is good, and that his love endures forever.

We read in Ezra 3 that the people around them frightened them, and that gets more serious now.

Ezra 4:4-5 - Officials stop work on the temple. *Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.* ⁵ *They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.* [Cyrus: 539-530; Cambyses (Cyrus' son): 530-522; Darius: 522-486]

So the work stopped for almost 25 years. But then God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to urge them to get going again. God wanted his temple built.

Ezra 5:1-5

¹ *Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.*

² *Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*

³ *At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?"* ⁴ *They also asked, "What are the names of those who are constructing this building?"* ⁵ *But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.*

So once they started again, the officials bullied them, but could not make them stop. Why did this happen? Because the governor was not powerful enough? Because the Jews were determined? No. Rather, because the eye of God was watching over them.

So the governor reported all this to Darius the king far away, and asked if he should allow the Jews to build their temple. Ezra 5-6 record for us the political process. Darius had the records checked, and found the decree of Cyrus that we read from Ezra.

Here's what Darius sent back to the governor watching over Judah:

Ezra 6:6-10 - *Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there.* ⁷ *Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.* ⁸ *Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:*

Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop.⁹ Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail,¹⁰ so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

"Don't stop them," says Darius. "In fact," he goes on, "pay for everything they need, not only to build the temple, but so that they can worship their God every day without fail."

Prov 21:1 - *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*

Ezra 6:15, 19, 22 - The temple completed. V15 - *The temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.* This was in 515 or 516, about 25 years after Cyrus sent the Jews back from exile to build the temple.

²² *For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.*

God filled them with joy by changing the king's attitude so that he helped them build the temple and worship God.

We can learn a few things from this story in Ezra 1-6. The most obvious is that **God controls nations and kings**. God raised Babylon, and then took Babylon down, as he predicted. God had Cyrus start the temple building, and had Darius finish it. God still does all of this. That is certainly what Scripture teaches.

We also see God's concern for how his people worship together. God worked in kings so that his people could worship in the right place and in the right way. That is the focus of the exiles' return to Judah. That's why they came back, and that was their task. It's a long trip. Imagine walking with your family from Winnipeg to Calgary to worship right.

But if stand back a bit, there is something else to see here. The Scripture encourages us to see God in events that look like entirely normal "natural" events. A lot of what the Bible gives God credit for can easily be explained without God.

If we will only see God when the Red Sea parts, or when Jesus rises from the dead, we've missed it. The Bible is like a pair of glasses through which to see **our** lives, and if there's one thing it teaches, it's that God controls and uses events that look entirely ordinary.

It might be better to say that seeing our lives through the Bible is like taking sunglasses off so that we can see the real light. God does have plans to prosper us, not to harm us (though it sure seemed otherwise then, as often now), plans to give us hope and a future. It is no mistake to see God in the things that shape our lives. Be patient. Be faithful.