

The Rumbblings of Renewal

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part I

Ezra 1:1-4

Introduction

For baseball fans, 1999 was a jackpot year that continued to pour out one exciting moment after another. My family kept pace with the home run race between Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire - two men who, by the way, exemplified terrific sportsmanship. Both men surpassed Babe Ruth's record of sixty home runs, and then they both raced past Roger Maris' record of sixty-one. With an unbelievable finale, McGwire pulled away with a total of seventy home runs. Even to people who do not care much about baseball, the name Mark McGwire is forever legendary.

But have you ever heard the name Josh Gibson? I had not, until Joe Stowell introduced him to me through a *Moody Monthly* article.

It seems that Josh Gibson has once again been ignored. Gibson is considered, by many, to be the greatest home run hitter of all time. He played from 1930 to 1946. In his second season at bat, at the age of nineteen, he hit seventy-five home runs. Ignored because he played mostly in, what was then known as, the Negro League, he hit seventy-five "homers" when blacks and whites did not play in the same league.

Now, for those who think the Negro League was an easier league to hit like that, you might want to know that the Negro League played against the white teams hundreds of times. In those games, they compiled a 3-to-1 winning average against them.

Enough people rallied to Gibson's cause, a number of years ago, that he was inducted

posthumously into the *National Baseball Hall of Fame*.

I would not have known of Josh Gibson if Stowell had not written about him. *He* would not have known about him except for a friend of his who sent an e-mail that began by saying, "Please share with your children . . . the home run record has not been broken!"

Then he went on to set the record straight!

As I was preparing to begin the study of book of Ezra, it struck me that this is a study of men and women whose records have been all but forgotten. They are heroes of the faith whose achievements have been largely ignored by the Christian community.

The Old Testament has become, for most Christians, a dusty relic from time past, unless, of course, you want a quick Psalm or Proverb for the day. We have forgotten that Paul wrote to Timothy and told him, under inspiration, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16 to 17, that the Old Testament was capable of equipping him for every good work.

In spite of that, the average Christian can spend his life in church and hear the record of Noah and a recount of David's grand slam against Goliath a thousand times, but never once hear the name of Ezra, and certainly never hear the name Zerubbabel. Not that Noah and David do not deserve careful attention, but, my belief is, that some of God's richest and deepest truths have been communicated through the lives of forgotten heroes in passages that long ago began to gather dust.

Well, as we begin this study in the Old Testament, I am excited to be able to blow off the dust, dig through the archives, and rediscover the hall of fame achievements of Ezra.

Now, as we will soon begin to hear the rumblings of a nation's renewal, I want to go back to II Kings and read passages to set the stage for the heroic achievements of Ezra and Zerubbabel. Turn, please, to II Kings, chapter 25, verses 1 to 12 and 18 to 21, and let us read the tragic events of Jerusalem's destruction and the beginning days of the Babylonian captivity.

Now it came about in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, camped against it, and built a siege wall all around it.

So the city was under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land.

Then the city was broken into, and all the men of war fled by night by way of the gate between the two walls beside the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were all around the city. And they went by way of the Arabah.

But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho and all his army was scattered from him.

Then they captured the king and brought him to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and he passed sentence on him.

And they slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him with bronze fetters and brought him to Babylon.

Now on the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

And he burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire.

So all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile.

But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

Skip to verses 18 to 21.

Then the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest and Zephaniah the second priest, with the three officers of the temple.

And from the city he took one official who was overseer of the men of war, and five of the king's advisers who were found in the city; and the scribe of the captain of the army, who mustered the people of the land; and sixty men of the people of the land who were found in the city.

And Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard took them and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah.

Then the king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamath. So Judah was led away into exile from its land.

When you read these words, you can almost feel the despair and see the horror and the tragedy of captivity. Why had it come to this? Because the people of God had stubbornly refused to follow God.

Even though God had sent to them the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah who warned of coming judgment, they still, with one voice, shouted down the prophets. They even called Jeremiah insane.

But now, they were captives with their beloved nation scattered and their capital city and holy temple destroyed. Thus began the seventy years of captivity that God had promised through the prophet Jeremiah.

Significant Principles For Every Culture

This leads us to the first significant principle for every culture and every generation.

When you disobey God, you have begun playing a game . . .

1. When you disobey God, you have begun playing a game you will never win.

If you play the game of sexual relations before marriage, and you are going to lose.

If you play the game of pornography, on the Internet or in the media, you are going to lose.

If you play the game of corporate ladder climbing and abandon your family along the way, you are going to lose.

The people of Israel thought they could ignore Jeremiah and Isaiah, "What do they know? We can live like we want!"

Then the horror of judgment came, and they realized, through tears of despair in their captivity, the need for revival, renewal, and restoration.

Now, between this passage and the book of Ezra is seventy years. For those who were keeping their calendars, they could almost hear the rumblings of renewal.

Then chariots pulled up outside of Babylon. In one was a general who would later be given the royal name of Darius, by King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire. The king of Babylon laughed at Darius, and behind the safety of his Babylonian walls planned a feast. It was a feast served to them by their Jewish slaves. During this feast they drank their wine from sacred Jewish vessels and scoffed at Persia's army. Who could besiege mighty Babylon? "Why, we have the mighty Euphrates flowing through our city. We can outlive any army."

It was during that feast, however, that suddenly a hand appeared and began writing a message on the wall. People shrieked in terror. All festivities vanished. The wise man, Daniel, was called, and he interpreted the message for this proud Babylonian king, named Belshazzar. He said, in Daniel, chapter 5, verses 27 to 28,

. . . you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient . . . your kingdom has been . . . given over to the . . . Persians.

And so it was, for that very night the Persians completed their strategy of diverting the Euphrates River. As a result, they were able to march under the city wall on an empty riverbed. So, in October, 2,460 years ago, the Babylonian Empire was crushed by the Persian Empire, and Cyrus, the king, was sovereign over it all.

The need for renewal -

Now, as for the Jewish slaves, their need for renewal was discovered in captivity. Just as the prodigal son came to his senses only after he landed in the pig pen, so the nation Israel came to its senses, so to speak, while in Babylonian captivity.

The essence of renewal -

You need more than an awareness of the need for renewal, however. That leads me to the comment that the essence of renewal is worship.

Now, if you will notice chapter 1, verse 3, in the book of Ezra and look at the heart of Cyrus' declaration there, you will discover God's primary intention with the people of Israel.

Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel . . .

After seventy years of chastening, God now moves to restore and renew His people. Did you notice that His first objective is not to restore their economy? That would come later. He did not move to restore their political establishment. We would do well to learn from this, by the way, as the American church continues to pour time and effort in hopes of somehow cleaning up Washington. The restoration of a political system is not the cause of revival, it is the result of revival.

Erwin Lutzer wrote, in, *Why the Cross Can Do What Politics Can't*,

When Great Britain was spiraling downward in moral and spiritual decline; when the British Parliament sometimes had to disband at midday because the members were too drunk to continue deliberations; when children worked in factories, rejected and exploited - God raised up John Wesley to preach the forgotten gospel, and the revival of the 18th century transformed society.

When God wanted the Israelites to turn back to Himself, He did not reform their housing or transportation; He did not make Persians love righteousness; He did not require Cyrus to decree that the Ten Commandments were binding on all of Persia. No. God began the renewal by refocusing the time and energy of His own people on rebuilding His temple and reviving biblical worship. It is when God's people are captivated and enthralled by the

King of heaven that they impact the kingdoms of earth the most.

C. S. Lewis wrote that Christians have largely ceased to think of the next world and, as a result, have become ineffective in this world.

Sovereign Power Over a Pagan Power

If you have forgotten the point that kingdoms come and kingdoms go, but God's kingdom is everlasting, you are driven back to that point in Ezra, chapter 1.

The desire of Cyrus

Look at the first verse. It is a stunning verse.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing . . .

Did you catch whose idea this proclamation was? Was it Cyrus'? Not on your life! It was God's.

The word translated "stirred up," in verse 1, is the Hebrew word that means "to awaken, to arouse to action, to open one's eyes". It was used in Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verse 11, for an eagle stirring up its nest. It was used in Psalm, chapter 108, verse 2, for a musical instrument being tuned or warmed up for playing.

God is about to restore His own people. He promised He would do so after seventy years, and now, He is sovereignly tuning up the heart of Cyrus for His own divine melody. This is a direct fulfillment of Solomon's proverb in chapter 21, verse 1, that says,

The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.

God is merely turning the heart of Cyrus and giving him the desire to let God's people go home.

The declaration of Cyrus

Continue to Ezra, chapter 1, verses 2 through 4, to read Cyrus' declaration.

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem,

which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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. And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem."

Now, some would say that Cyrus evidently became a believer in Yahweh. Look at the language he uses in verse 2 again,

. . . The Lord, the God of heaven . . .

and in verse 3,

. . . the God of Israel . . .

However, inscriptions written by Cyrus tell another story.

In one inscription, written to the defeated Babylonians, Cyrus wanted them to believe that their chief god, Marduk, had also appointed him to conquer Babylon,

Marduk scanned all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler . . . then he pronounced the name of Cyrus . . . Marduk, the great lord, a protector of his people, beheld with pleasure Cyrus's good deeds and therefore ordered him to march against his city Babylon. All the inhabitants of Babylon as well as of the entire country bowed to Cyrus and kissed his feet . . . and with shining faces . . . they worshiped his very name. I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, king of Babylon . . . king of the four rims of the earth . . .

Obviously, from this inscription, Cyrus was a polytheist, that is, he believed in the existence of many gods. In fact, in another inscription he writes these revealing words,

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask for a long life for me.

It is possible to say all the right things about God, and still not know God personally. It is possible for a person to use all the right terms, without ever experiencing redemption.

I say to you that this not only happened to Cyrus in the land of Persia, but it is happening in the land of America by the millions. There are people who know all the religious terms, people who carry their Bibles and walk into a church auditorium on Sunday, people who sound religious, but have never been

redeemed. They have never bent their knee to the Lord of heaven, setting aside all their good deeds, as Cyrus boasted of, and said, "I am a sinner, I place my faith in You alone."

Now, Cyrus also made the mistake of believing something wrong about Israel's God. Look again at the last part of verse 3. Cyrus said,

... He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Cyrus thought the God of Israel was limited to the land of Israel. He did not know that God is not bound by geography.

This, by the way, is the theology of the religious unbeliever. "God is somebody who lives in that church over there. People go in there once a week to keep Him company. He's somebody who belongs in a prayer book, He doesn't live Monday through Saturday, He doesn't have any control over my business or my personal life - He belongs in Jerusalem."

No, my friend, if you truly know this one and only true God, you will know that He is the God who is over and above all creation and has the right to every corner and closet of your life. If you truly know Him, then you know He is truly Lord.

By the way, just how was Cyrus introduced to the God of Israel in such a way that he would believe this god was as much alive as all the other gods?

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, informs us that Cyrus was actually shown a prophecy by a Jewish prophet that was predicted approximately one hundred fifty years before the birth of Cyrus. The amazing thing was, it actually named Cyrus.

Let me show that prophecy to you in Isaiah, chapter 44, verse 28. God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah.

It is I who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire." And he declares of Jerusalem, "She will be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid."

Continue to Isaiah, chapter 45, verses 1 through 6.

Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze, and cut

through their iron bars. And I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden wealth of secret places, in order that you may know that it is I, The Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other"

Josephus wrote that when Cyrus saw this amazing prediction, written approximately one hundred fifty years before his own birth, he was seized with an earnest desire and ambition to fulfill what was so written.

This prophecy in Isaiah leads me to the second significant principle for every culture:

God's faithfulness to His word does not depend . . .

2. God's faithfulness to His word does not depend on us understanding it.

Imagine prophesying a liberator, by the name of Cyrus, would come! These words would not make sense for several hundred years. A king named Cyrus was going to do something significant. "Who is Cyrus?"

Cyrus will not be born for another one hundred fifty years.

Imagine God saying something to His people that will not really make sense, or come about, until over a hundred years have passed.

You might say, "Well, the Israelites should have been patient. They should have believed that God is faithful, even when He does not make sense!"

I agree! Now apply that to your life. Would you give God one hundred fifty years to clear things up for your family? Are you kidding? We will not give Him one year. In fact, we will hardly give Him one week. He must make sense of things in my life now!

How wonderful that our sovereign God is not handicapped by our lack of understanding and that He is faithful to His word, even when we do not understand what His word means.

A third and final principle for every culture:

The supremacy of God prevails over . . .

3. The supremacy of God prevails over the power of mankind.

You cannot help but discover, in Ezra, chapter 1, that the One in control is God. God, who was introduced to the most powerful king on earth; God who moved the heart of the king to act on His behalf.

Silent Players in a Divine Drama

One more thing, in the form of a question. Just who was it that introduced King Cyrus to the prophecy of Isaiah? Who showed him the writing of scripture?

The Bible does not say, but I believe, like many other Bible teachers and students of God's redemptive history, that it could be only one man. Only one man had access to the king; only one man, within the kingdom of Persia, had this knowledge of scripture and the courage to share it. It was the man whom Cyrus named prime minister – the man named Daniel.

Think of it, Daniel, in effect, was waiting for Cyrus to come. God was at work long before Cyrus ever showed up. And God has been at work ever since. Oh, nations have changed their borders and their kings many times since Cyrus' reign, but God is still in total control, His wonders to perform.

There are actually several players in this divine drama. We will discover them as we continue our study of this and other books of biblical history.

The hidden influence of Daniel.

The timely influence of Esther.

The unheralded role of Zerubbabel.

The faithful ministry of Ezra.

The unbending courage of Nehemiah.

Let us set the record straight – God is in complete control. History is merely His story, played out on the stage of world affairs.

It is His story. God alone is sovereign.

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