

I'd Rather Have Babylon

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part II

Ezra 1:5-11

Introduction

Recently a gentleman told me a story related to the Holocaust and the incarceration and killing of Jews in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. I told him that the story he related to me was incredible and asked if he could possibly verify it. I soon received a copy of that verification, which, by the way, was sent by a rabbi in Jerusalem.

The true story took place in Auschwitz toward the end of the war. As in all the camps, there was no lack of great Jewish scholars at Auschwitz. One night, ten of the greatest scholars there made a Jewish court of law and put God on trial.

How was it possible that God, who is totally good, could create such a living hell as Auschwitz? The debate raged back and forth all night, until finally, the court returned a verdict of, "Guilty." God was guilty of failing His people. However, on finishing the court, the entire barrack got up and began to pray the morning prayers. Even after finding God guilty, they prayed to Him.

The Rabbi went on to say a few more words and then closed his e-mail to my gentleman friend with, "Best regards from Jerusalem, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer".

What an incredible statement of faith it was for these Jews to continue praying to God, even while the torture and systematic killing continued. Yet, I thought how tragic to think that they were now praying to a God they believed had left them all alone.

If you have ever come to the conclusion that God has somehow disappeared and left you on your own,

all you have to do is crack open the Old Testament book of Ezra. You will be struck by the fact that God is there all the time.

The Prophecies Fulfilled

The omniscience of God revealed

In the study of Ezra, chapter 1, verses 1 through 4, we observed several prophecies that God had given that have been fulfilled.

Isaiah 44:28 – God knew Cyrus' name before he was born. He knew yours too!

Nearly two hundred years before the birth of Cyrus, the Persian ruler over Babylon and all its former empire, Isaiah prophesied concerning him. Chapter 44, verse 28, says,

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."

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, tells us that, when Cyrus saw this prophecy in Isaiah that included his very name, he was seized with an earnest desire to carry out the word of the Lord.

God knew Cyrus' name before he was born. Do you know what is so great about that? He knew your name too! He knew where you would be born, where you would live, and for how long. The question is, are you willing to obey the word of the Lord too?

Jeremiah 25:12 – God may seem to wink at evil, but He ultimately judges sin.

Another prophecy, given by Jeremiah, recorded in chapter 25, verses 12 to 13, reads,

“Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,” declares the Lord, “for their iniquity . . . And I will bring upon that land all My words which I have pronounced against it . . .”

The principle is simple – God may seem to wink at evil, but He ultimately judges sin.

Jeremiah 29:10-11 – God’s plans for His people often require difficulty, but He ultimately desires our development.

Then Jeremiah, chapter 29, verses 10 and 11, say,

For thus says the Lord, “When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”

God’s plans for His people often involve or even require difficulty, but God ultimately desires our development. He prophesied, through Jeremiah to the Israelite captives in Babylon, “I have a plan for you.”

Daniel 5:17-30 – God always has His servants at the right place at the right time to represent His purposes.

Then finally, in Daniel, chapter 5, verses 17 to 30, we discover that God had planted Daniel deep within the Babylonian kingdom. This was so that, among other things, Daniel could deliver the message of God’s judgment to Belshazzar the very night Cyrus’ troops rushed into the capital city and overthrew Babylon.

The principle at work is that God has His people at the right place at the right time to represent His purposes. God knows who you are, where you are, and why!

A new believer recently asked me, “Why am I here?”

The answer is, “God knows!”

He knew your beginning and He knows your future. In fact, He has already been to your future and has returned so that He can shepherd you through it.

That phrase, in Daniel, chapter 7, “the Ancient of Days” is reserved for God alone. It places particular emphasis upon the pre-existence of our great God.

He is the Ancient of Days. He preceded any day before there was the first day. He is older than time, for He created time.

The prophecy of Daniel, chapter 7, says that God is, “the Ancient of Days.” The same phrase appears in the earlier church hymnody in the classic theological treatise written by Walter Chalmers Smith and put to music by John Roberts. The first stanza reads:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient
of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we
praise.*

When God starts something, He finishes it. And giving even greater security is that He knows how it finishes. He is the Ancient of Days. God has not left you alone. He is faithful to His word. His plans are not overthrown, by Babylon or Auschwitz.

Philippians, chapter 1, verse 6, tells us that,

. . . He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.

The Proclamation Delivered

Now, let us re-read the proclamation of Cyrus, in Ezra, chapter 1, verse 3.

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.

The supremacy of God revealed

This is nothing less than the supremacy of God revealed.

Chuck Swindoll wrote, in *Insight for Living*, an article entitled, *God’s Masterwork: A Concerto in Sixty-six Movements*,

Talk about the sovereignty of God! Here’s a pagan king who just inherited somewhere

around two to three million Jewish captives from his predecessor. By now they have bought homes, opened businesses, and blended into society. These Hebrews represent a lot of labor and tax income for Persia. Yet Cyrus says, "Go home; rebuild."

Cyrus is not in charge, God is.

He not only stirred up the heart of Cyrus, God was at work in some other hearts as well.

Notice verses 5 and 6 of Ezra, chapter 1.

Then the heads of fathers' household of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.

You can almost feel the excitement among the people. In fact, even Cyrus makes a donation. Look at verses 7 through 11.

Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1,000 other articles. All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Why would Cyrus give away this enormous wealth? Because, verse 1 said that God stirred up his heart! This is as Solomon said in Proverbs, chapter 21, verse 1,

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

Here is a pagan king giving away gold and silver to his subjects. That would be like the Internal Revenue Service sending me a fat check with a note that said, "You've been giving to us for so many years, we think it's time we gave back to you."

That, too, would be miraculous!

Whether the Israelite believed or not, God was going to keep His word. God is not guilty of jumping ship, He has not left His people alone.

In an extremely poor analogy, God is kind of like the boy who is "it" in a game of hide and seek. After counting to one hundred, skipping over everything from around twenty to number ninety-nine, he finally says, so that everyone can hear him in the neighborhood, "Ready or not, here I come."

God has counted to seventy years.

You can calculate that seventy years one of two ways:

1. the first way is to count the time between the first captivity in 605 until the altar was rebuilt in 535, or
2. secondly, from the time the temple was destroyed in 586 to the time it was rebuilt in 516 B.C.

Either way, you have exactly seventy years. "Ready or not, here I come."

The Perspective Revealed

This is the part of this story, however, that, though still exciting, fulfilling, and adventuresome, has a hollow ring to it and an overcast gray sky above it. You have to look carefully through the details of Ezra, chapter 2, to find it. Eventually, though, after enduring an exercise of pronunciation, you get to the end of verse 67 and discover that less than 50,000 Jews wanted to go back.

The announcement had been made to nearly three million Jews, "You can return home! You are free to go back to Jerusalem; free to rebuild your national life and theocentric worship in the temple. You can go home!"

The perspective of a nation revealed

Out of three million Jews, 50,000 say, "We want to go home."

But the rest of them said, in effect, "We'd rather have Babylon."

The book of Ezra does not record it, but I can guarantee that an incredible amount of turmoil was created that day. Emotions ran high, sides were taken, and fingers were pointed as the majority of the nation made its decision to stay.

Let me interject that I truly believe so much of the turmoil in Christianity today, so much of the pressure and emotional stress, and so much of the

topsy-turvy upheavals believers experience is upheaval, stress, and emotional problems directly rooted in the promise of scripture as James, chapter 1, verse 8, says,

. . . a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Spiritual schizophrenia is rampant in the church today. Its basic symptom is stated in this fashion:

“I believe in God, but I’d rather have Babylon.”

“I believe in God, but I’ll never risk my academic standing by saying so.”

“I believe in God, but I’ll lie when necessary, lest I lose that contract.”

“I believe in God, but I’ll never pursue Him, because I’ll not be able to keep all my money for myself or my family.”

“I believe in God, but I’ll allow sexual intimacy with my boyfriend, lest I lose him.”

“I believe in God, but I’ll keep quiet about my Christianity, lest I lose my friends.”

“I believe in God, but I’d really rather have Babylon!”

Two failures

How could an entire generation come to this decision? A generation who had been born during captivity, and were now in their thirties, forties, and fifties.

Well, during this period of captivity, while the Jews have been away from their homeland, they failed in two critical areas.

They had communicated their family descent . . .

1. Their first area of failure was that they had communicated to the next generation their family descent, but had forgotten the dynamic of worship.

The significance of chapter 1, verse 5, and all of chapter 2 is more than the fact that they kept records and more than the fact that everyone knew who their fathers and their grandfathers were and the tribe to which they belonged. They kept those records as a statement of their national unity and belief that one day they would indeed return to their homeland.

“You need priests to offer sacrifices. Make sure we know who the priests are. Every tribe has certain lands belonging to them. Make sure we know exactly where we will live in the land.”

“We all know what tribe we belong to. We know all about Jerusalem. We know the stories of God’s work in the Holy City. One day we’re going back – just wait and see. One day we’ll go back to the Fatherland.”

“Wait a second! You want us to go now?!”

How many of you will live for Jesus Christ?

“I will!”

How many of you will live for Him now – in the corporate world, on the campus, in the repair shop, in the marketplace? How many of you will serve Him now?

While the Jewish people had diligently kept their identity, they had lost their purpose. Their tribal history meant nothing in Babylon. It was designed for the centrality of Jerusalem and their representation at the temple.

But, there was an entire generation of Jews that had never seen Jerusalem and had never worshipped in the temple. They had never worshipped God in the holy city in the temple that now lay in ruins.

And, their parents had grown accustomed to Babylon. Persian records, during this time, reveal that the Jewish captives were allowed freedom to generate business and to make a profit from their own pursuits. Many of them, according to the Persian records, had actually accumulated great wealth.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wealth. We are all, compared to global standards, very wealthy people. But now, they were given the option to stay where it was comfortable or to travel more than a thousand miles to a fifty year old pile of rubble and ruin and start all over again.

So, they chose the comforts of captivity . . . and their grown children followed their example. We cannot impart to our children something we do not have. Why should they have a vision for worshipping God in Jerusalem when we are satisfied with Babylon?

So, first of all, they had communicated to their children the family lineage, but had failed to communicate the dynamic of worship.

They had disconnected what they believed . . .

2. Their second area of failure was that they had disconnected what they believed from how they lived.

I can imagine interviewing the average Israelite on the streets of Babylon on this day. The first

question might be, “Do you believe in the God of Israel?”

“Sure do.”

“Do you believe that Israel is the land God designed for His people to inhabit?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you believe that God would like to have His temple rebuilt and worship restored?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about it. Sure He would.”

“Well, would you be willing to return and see that His desires are fulfilled?”

“Oh! Oh, not me.”

A Gallup poll surveyed mainline denominations, a few years ago, and discovered this same alarming disconnection. Of those surveyed, only thirty-two percent believed that their faith had anything to do with how they lived their lives. In other words, sixty-eight percent of professing believers had somehow come to the conclusion that what they believed had nothing to do with how they lived.

Are you infected by this?

Let me read some statements that I received recently in the mail:

Funny how long it takes to serve God for an hour, but how quickly a team plays sixty minutes of basketball.

Funny how long a couple of hours spent at church seems, but how short it seems when watching a movie.

Funny how a twenty dollar bill seems so big when you put it in the offering plate, but how small it seems when you take it to the mall.

Funny, how hard it is to read a chapter in the Bible, but how easy it is to read a novel.

Funny how we believe what we hear on the news or learn in the secular classroom, but question what the Bible says.

Funny how we need two weeks advance notice to fit a church event into our schedule, but can adjust our schedule for social events at the last minute.

Funny how we cannot think of anything to say when we pray, but can talk for an hour to a friend.

A believer is someone who not only believes the truth, but is willing to live the truth.

So, the joy of Ezra, chapter 1, is slightly overshadowed by the choice of so many Jews to remain in Babylon. To their grandfathers, Jerusalem had been a way of life. To them, it was just a pile of rubble in need of repair.

The key phrase, again, is in verse 5,

everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord . . .

You might say that God did not stir up everyone’s heart to go back. You are right. God is the initiator; He is the motivator. Yet, do not overlook the responsibility of the believer.

If you read enough of your Bible, you will discover the mystery of divine initiation and human cooperation. And, as well, that God holds every believer responsible for what he refuses to do. As James, chapter 4, verse 17, tells us,

Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.

What are you choosing today, my friend?

I remember hearing the story, years ago, of two young men who were both talented singers. One was a tenor and the other was a deep baritone. Both were believers and were working on a radio show together, singing Christian music.

It was not long before their talents were discovered by the secular world and both young men were offered lucrative contracts. One man said, “Yes,” and turned his back on the investment of his talent for the glory of God. The other young man said, “No,” as he wanted to use his voice to sing about his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The man who chose Babylon, I have never even heard of. But, the man who chose to sing for Christ, has sung before millions of people the world over. His name is George Beverly Shea, the now elderly singer who has traveled nearly sixty years with Billy Graham.

It is not ironic that George Beverly Shea wrote the music to a hymn that became just as famous. It is entitled, *I’d Rather Have Jesus*. You could say it epitomizes his decision of many years ago.

The words are:

I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold;

I’d rather be His than have riches untold;

I’d rather have Jesus than houses or lands;

I’d rather be led by His nail-pierced hand.

*I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause;
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than world-wide fame;
I'd rather be true to His holy name.*

*Than to be the king of a vast domain,
or be held in sin's dread sway;
I'd rather have Jesus than anything,
this world affords today.*

These Jews, in effect, had been singing for decades, "I'd rather have God."

But, when it came time to act, they changed their song to, "I'd really rather have Babylon."

I do not know about you, but as one author said,
*I want to know where God is going, and go
with Him, right.*

And think of this final thought – what God chose to record for us, throughout the rest of this little book, is the story of those who followed Him. Those whose music clearly rang out, "I'm leaving old Babylon, I'd rather follow God."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/21/1999 by Stephen Davey.

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