

A Royal Decree to Rebuild the House of God

Ezra 1:1-4

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This Lord's Day we embark upon a new series of sermons through the Book of Ezra. In the Book of Ezra, we will see the sovereign God of the nations at work in the decrees of Gentile kings who become nursing fathers to the people of God in promoting, supporting, and establishing the Church of the Lord (in the Old Testament), and who at other times become hindrances to the growth of God's Kingdom. Moreover, we will not only see the triumphal deliverance of God's people from Babylonian captivity, but will also see the hardships and struggles God's people faced in promoting reformation once they had returned to the land of promise.

As is so often the case, Christ's salvation and deliverance from sin, error, and bondage in this life does not bring an end to struggle, heartache, and hardship in promoting and maintaining past victories. In fact, the real work is in our daily growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ and in putting off the old man and in putting on the new man. At such times we cry out with the apostle Paul, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24). And that same apostle of God's grace declares in the very next verse, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25). For it is through the death and resurrection of Christ that our victory is absolutely assured, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Romans 8:37).

I love history. I love to study history. For in it we see the hand of our glorious God at work in every detail of His sovereign plan as He graciously saves His people and justly punishes His enemies. I especially love to study biblical/redemptive history, because it (being inspired by the Lord) so often foreshadows God's redemptive purposes that are yet in the future and points to prophetic events yet to come. And such events in redemptive history we will also seek to make clear through our study of the Book of Ezra. Thus, let us begin our adventure through the Book of Ezra as we behold the handiwork of the Lord in history. Our main points this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Some Preliminary Considerations about the Book of Ezra; (2) The Royal Decree of a Gentile King (Ezra 1:1-4).

I. Some Preliminary Considerations about the Book of Ezra.

A. First, who was Ezra?

1. Ezra was a priest, whose genealogy may be traced directly back to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5) and who was mightily used by the Lord to promote reformation among the Israelites that returned from Babylonian captivity to the land of promise. His name means "help" which is what this godly minister of the Lord was to God's people who were in need of sound doctrine and faithful leadership in promoting reformation among them. Ezra is also designated as a "ready scribe" (i.e. is skilled scribe) in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). As a priest, Ezra was a leader in the worship of God, and as scribe, he was a leader in interpreting and applying the Law of God to the many circumstances that related to the lives of God's people (Ezra 7:10). Thus, his familiarity with God's Word would make him especially valuable in taking the people back to what God's revealed will was for their lives.

2. This scribal aspect of the ministry (in interpreting and applying God's Word) is absolutely essential to all who would be faithful ministers of Jesus Christ (Titus 1:9). And you who are husbands and fathers (or mothers as single parents) should likewise seek to become within your own families increasingly skilled in applying God's word to the world in which your families live every day. There ought not to be some

dualistic approach which views the Bible as what is used only on the Lord's Day, while viewing textbooks, newspapers, or mere common sense as appropriate for the other six days of the week. Dear ones, heavenly wisdom (which comes from the Spirit-inspired Scriptures) is that by which we are to live our lives all of the time, and not just some of the time. In fact, it is necessary that you grow in your understanding of God's Word (and in your ability to apply it) in order that you may be able to judge what comes from this pulpit (or any other pulpit) as to its faithfulness or lack thereof (Acts 17:11). Without such a growing knowledge of Scripture, you will be yielding simply a blind faith to what is preached to you. Remember, dear ones, a blind faith is a popish faith. Our faith cannot rest in any mere man (2 Corinthians 1:24).

B. Second, who is the author of the Book of Ezra?

1. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Ezra, the priest and scribe, was the vessel the Lord used to pen this inspired book. Both early Jewish and Christian writings ascribe authorship of this book to Ezra. A significant portion of the Book of Ezra is written in the first person (see Ezra 7:25 through Ezra 9).

2. Actually, in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear as one book: the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. It would also appear that the chronicler who recorded (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) the books of 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles was also the same author of the Book of Ezra, for where the Book of 2 Chronicles leaves off (in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23), there the Book of Ezra begins with the same inspired words (in Ezra 1:1-2).

C. Third, what are the historical circumstances that surround the Book of Ezra?

1. The northern kingdom of Israel had been led into captivity at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 b.c., due to the gross violation of God's covenant made with them at Mt. Sinai.

2. The southern kingdom of Judah had been led into captivity at the hands of the Babylonians in three stages due to the gross violation of God's covenant made with them as well at Mt. Sinai: 606 b.c. (Daniel); 597 b.c. (Ezekiel); and 586 (the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem).

3. The very night that Belshazzar, king of Babylon, was desecrating the vessels used in the temple of God and taken as spoil by Nebuchadnezzar, and the very night that the fearful handwriting on the wall occurred, in which Daniel was summoned to translate the mysterious writing that prophesied the fall of Babylon (according to Daniel 5), on that very night the Medes/Persians crafted a way to divert the Euphrates river from its flow through Babylon; and with water only thigh deep, the armies of Medo-Persia entered the great city of Babylon by stealth without any significant battle, so as to conquer the drunken city of Babylon (as is reported by Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, cp. *A Commentary on Daniel* by Leon Wood, p.131). Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian might in October of 539 b.c.

4. It was sometime late in 538 b.c. (within the first year that Babylon was conquered by Cyrus) that Cyrus issued the great decree that we find in Ezra 1:1-4. And about a year later approximately 50,000 Jews in Babylon began their journey out of Babylon and into the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and to their descendants (in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 29:10).

5. Dear ones, it is easy to quickly pass through a brief history lesson like this with little thought given to all that came to pass in accordance with God's merciful promise to His people in Jeremiah 29:10-14. Why did the Lord raise up kings and kingdoms, and put down kings and kingdoms? Why did our gracious God move great armies and nations to accomplish His will? He did so **in order to demonstrate His love to His people** (who were covenanted to Him) in rescuing them from servile bondage and in sending them forth to establish a reformation of biblical religion in the land promised to them, **and in order to demonstrate His faithfulness to keep His own word of promise** to His people, even when they were in the very clutches of their enemies.

a. My dear brothers and sisters, God's unchangeable character of everlasting love for His children and of unbending faithfulness to His own promises is that to which we must turn in those times in which we (or our loved ones) suffer under the chastening hand of the Lord. The Lord cannot forget you, dear Christian. The Lord will sooner forget His only begotten Son as to forget you for whom the Son of God suffered the wrath of God. The Lord can do you no wrong, dear child of God, in all that He brings into your life. Your gracious Father will sooner deny Himself as to leave one promise to you unfulfilled, who trust alone in Christ for your righteousness, forgiveness, sanctification, and everlasting life.

b. Beloved, Christ Jesus prays for you without ceasing that your faith in Him will not be destroyed. Jesus will sooner fall from His throne at God's right hand, as to fail to keep you in constant prayer before your Heavenly Father that your faith never be destroyed, no matter what you (or your loved ones) may face. One writer put it this way,

If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me (*Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne*, Rev. Andrew A. Bonar, p. 185, Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844).

Dear ones, such a history lesson from God's Holy Word is never dry, but is ever refreshing, because it reveals the love of God for His people, and the faithfulness of God to His promises.

II. The Royal Decree of a Gentile King (Ezra 1:1-4).

A. This royal decree was made by Cyrus, king of Persia.

1. Cyrus II (or Cyrus the Great) unified the Persian people with the Medes under one throne, and extended the Medo-Persian empire to include more territory in the world than any empire up to that time had known. The empire which he established continued for two centuries until it fell to the Greek empire under Alexander the Great in 331 b.c. On October 12, 539 b.c., Babylon the great fell to the Persians while Belshazzar was engaged in a riotous and drunken banquet, blaspheming the Most High God, within what he thought were impenetrable walls. But no walls of man, no fortress of man, or no army of man, can withstand the power of God. The Lord could have brought down the mighty walls of Babylon like that of Jericho had He chosen to do so. But in this instance, the Lord chose to dry up the Euphrates River, so that the Persian army could overwhelm Babylon without hardly a struggle, and in so doing restore a believing and repentant Israel back to her land (cp. Isaiah 44:26-28; Jeremiah 50:35,38; Ezra 1:1-4; Revelation 16:12). Why did the Lord choose means that were less conspicuous to subdue Babylon (namely, by diverting the Euphrates River)? I would submit He did so in order that we might not put our trust and confidence in the means God uses, but rather in the God who uses whatever means will bring Him pleasure and glory (cp. the healing of the blind man's eyes by means of spitting in his eyes, in Mark 8:23).

2. Cyrus states in the decree that we find in Ezra 1:2: "the LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a House at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." How did this charge from Jehovah come to Cyrus? By vision, by dream, or by a voice from heaven? Any of these forms of revelation are possible; however, I would submit that the charge to Cyrus might more likely have been communicated to him by the revelation of Scripture (which mentions Cyrus by name) and through the testimony of Daniel (who lived in Babylon at least until the third year of the reign of Cyrus, according to Daniel 10:1). The Jewish historian, Josephus, who had access to historical records that have long been lost, records the following:

When Cyrus read this [i.e. that he was prophesied by name in Scripture 150 years before this time—GLP], and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to

fulfill what was so written [*Antiquities*, XI, i, 2].

a. What prophecies would Cyrus have likely read about himself (and perhaps Daniel, as third in command in Babylon [Daniel 5:29], possibly explained to him)? I think we can infer from Ezra 1:1 that Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 29:10) was likely revealed to Cyrus (which specifically measured the time of Babylonian captivity as being 70 years, which time had nearly come to an end, when Cyrus conquered Babylon). But also consider Isaiah 44:24-45:1 (where the Lord specifically identifies by name Israel's deliverer and restorer to their land). Neither the Spirit of the Lord nor the prophet of the Lord in Babylon would surely have left Cyrus without knowledge of what was revealed about him in Scripture (especially as Cyrus specifically states that Jehovah charged him to build Him a House, which is what is specifically prophesied in Isaiah 44:28). Though Cyrus knew not the one true living God (according to Isaiah 45:4-5), God knew Cyrus by name and had determined in His most holy and wise plan how Cyrus, a Gentile king, would fulfill His [i.e. God's] plan in judging the wicked Babylonians and in delivering His people out of Babylonian bondage.

b. What a most comforting truth it is to know that though kings, presidents, and prime ministers, or though parliaments, congresses, and assemblies may roar in rage against Christ and His followers by way of wicked laws in suppressing the truth of Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, and it is He who uses and disposes all magistrates to accomplish His most loving, wise, and holy purposes concerning His people. There is no act or decree by any magistrate that can touch you or me apart from the decree of Christ, who is the Prince of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5). That doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for fellow Christians who suffer for the gospel and for righteousness sake throughout the world. Nor does it mean we shouldn't pray for God's protection against persecution (for the truth of Christ) in our own country, or give expression to our dissent when laws are passed that may have the effect of persecuting Christians who stand for the Cause of Christ (as is true of *The National Defense Authorization Act* that was recently passed by Congress and signed by the President [December 31, 2011], which opens the door by way of its broad language to arresting and indefinitely incarcerating without judicial warrant or due process Americans who are suspected by the President to be terrorists and enemies of the state). Dear ones, our comfort in such times as these must always be in the knowledge and assurance that "the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" [Proverbs 21:1]. Not a hair on the head of one of us can perish apart from the infinite love and wisdom of our Savior.

B. The decree of Cyrus demonstrates how God raised up Cyrus to be a nursing father to the Church in the Old Testament, and how God used Cyrus to promote a covenanted reformation (Ezra 1:2-4).

1. Cyrus saw it as his duty before Jehovah God to rebuild God's House and to re-establish the true worship of the Lord in Jerusalem (by way of his authority and financial help). If God commanded that Cyrus, a Gentile ruler, establish, support, and promote a pure covenanted reformation of biblical religion in a covenanted land, how is it that so many argue that Gentile rulers in nations at the present time cannot use their authority to establish, support, and promote a pure covenanted reformation of biblical religion in covenanted lands like Scotland, Ireland, England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States? Dear ones, it is no less the duty of civil magistrates today to be nursing fathers to the faithful Church of Christ in the New Testament (whether the faithful Church is in a Gentile nation or in Israel), than it was for Cyrus to be a nursing father to the Church of the Old Testament. For this is the command of God to the civil rulers in Gentile nations even today (Psalm 2:10-12). And even the Gentile kings are prophesied to bring their gifts unto Christ to the support of His Church (in Psalm 72:10-11). Gentile kings shall be nursing fathers to His people in promoting the one true religion (this is precisely the language used of Gentile rulers in Isaiah who are prophesied to promote and support in their official capacity the growth and support of the true religion, Isaiah 60:16,18). It is true that the civil magistrate cannot assume the place of Christ in ruling over Christ's Church,

but it is not true that the civil magistrate is not to establish biblical Christianity and to aid and support it as the only national religion (for the civil magistrate in his official capacity has been ordained by God to be the minister of God to the Church for its good, according to Romans 13:4).

2. The decree of Cyrus was a year of jubilee to God's people who were set free from Babylonian captivity so as to practice and promote the one true religion by way of God's appointed worship and officers in His Church. Just as the year of jubilee was an appointed season every 50 years that set free those who were in indentured bondage in Israel, so as to return to their land and to their family, so the Lord accomplished a similar liberty from bondage for His people out of Babylon. When the Lord Jesus preached in the synagogue of His home town in Nazareth, He read from Isaiah 61:1-2 the following words and said they were fulfilled in His ministry of salvation and deliverance from the bondage of sin and Satan,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord [Luke 4:18-19].

3. Dear ones, Jesus declared that the deliverance from bondage to which the year of jubilee pointed (and I submit to which the deliverance from bondage in Babylon pointed) was a spiritual deliverance by Christ from bondage to sin, to error, and to the tyranny of Satan who seeks to enslave the Church of Christ by means of that mystical Babylon (the Romish Church mentioned in Revelation 17) and by means of that man of sin (the papal antichrist mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2), who usurps the place of Christ by taking up a royal seat in the temple or church of Christ that belongs to Christ alone. Just as there was announced a jubilee of deliverance (in Ezra 1:1-4) for the Old Testament Church from Babylon (that great city of bondage, of idolatry, and of desecration by Belshazzar who drank from the vessels God appointed for holy use in God's house, Daniel 5), so the Lord Jesus proclaimed a better jubilee of deliverance from mystical Babylon (that great city of ecclesiastical and spiritual bondage, of idolatry, and of desecration by the papal antichrist who takes the holy vessels of God's worship [like the Lord's Supper] and pours abominations into that cup, teaching the blasphemous doctrine that Christ continues to be offered over and over again for the sins of His people [in violation of Hebrews 9:28], as a way to keep the people coming back to the mass for forgiveness). For this mystical Babylon has held in bondage the souls of men (according to Revelation 18:13). And the Lord proclaims the year of jubilee through the sound and faithful preaching of the gospel of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, a liberty from all popish tyranny in doctrine, worship, government, and discipline when He declares in Revelation 18:4:

Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.

4. Dear ones, this mystical Babylon and its son of perdition (the pope) have not ceased to enslave the souls of men (over a billion souls are members of the Roman Catholic Church worldwide). And it may be significant in relation to Rome exercising the power she once exercised in Europe that just recently the pope appointed 22 new cardinals (16 of whom are from Europe and seven of those 16 from Italy), almost assuring his successor to come from Italy, a development that some see as a decided turn from the wishy-washy ecumenism in Rome since Vatican II, to the historical firm hand of Rome that controlled Europe and the Holy Roman Empire, and which defeated the Muslim Moors in Spain under Charlemagne. Dear ones, with the spread of Islam throughout Europe presently, many Europeans are beginning to look back to a strong Western culture that defeated the Moors and controlled Europe for centuries under the papacy of Rome and under the Holy Roman Emperor (whose throne for many years was seated in what is now Germany). Another article I

read recently spoke of the Germanization of Europe (with the economic collapse of Europe) and fears in some circles of the formation of a Fourth Reich. These are indeed interesting developments in light of prophetic events that speak of the whore of Babylon riding upon the civil beast (which civil beast is composed of the 10 tribes or kingdoms that formed what we now know as Europe) in warring against the Lamb and those who faithfully follow Christ (Revelation 13 and 17). Dear ones, my point is simply this: Rome (ecclesiastical and papal) is not dead. It enslaves so much of the world, and this whore is said to be “the mother of harlots” (i.e. she has daughter churches that have drunk of her abominations in denying the free grace of God, in enslaving people under a covenant of works, in leading people to worship God by idols and by acts and by holy days not appointed in His word, and in tyrannizing the consciences of people to submit to the decrees of ecclesiastical and papal Rome on the basis of their own unscriptural authority and mere human tradition).

5. Beloved, the price of being faithful to Christ has cost many their families, has cost many their jobs, has cost many their possessions, and has even cost many their lives. And so it may likewise cost us the same. And the love of many has sadly grown cold in regard to the doctrine and worship of Christ as found in His Holy Word and summarized in faithful Confessions of Faith (like the Westminster Confession of Faith) and in faithful Covenants (like the Solemn League and Covenant). But dear ones, Jesus asked, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his own soul? The path of faithfulness to Christ has been blazed before us by the blood of faithful covenanters who were willing to forsake this world and everything in it in order to follow Christ out of Babylon and into the land of promise. May the Lord grant us the grace to follow in the biblical footsteps of our covenanted forefathers—whatever it may cost us. Beloved, we will have no regrets for choosing to be faithful to Christ over choosing to be comfortable in this life, as we breathe our last breath, and as we are ushered into the very presence of the Lord.

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