

Promise Made – Promise Kept

We are starting a new series today with a focus on the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These are two books in our Bibles, but most scholars agree that these books should be considered together, one book in the original form.



We should consider all this in the context of the *big picture* timeline, placing Ezra-Nehemiah in the history of the People of God.

- God is the Creator... creating everything that we know...
- Crowning His creation with the creatures He made in His own image: humans
- Adam and Eve are the humans focused on in the very beginning
- Noah is another prominent figure, followed by...
- Abraham (the Father of Faith)
- God **promised** Abraham that He would miraculously accomplish His purposes through a people from Abraham's descendants
- Abraham's son was Isaac
- Isaac's son was Jacob
- God renamed Jacob Israel
- Israel had 12 sons
- Joseph was a prominent son, rising to power in Egypt, and thus provided relief from famine for all his family
- The Egyptians eventually treated the Hebrews poorly
- Moses rose to lead the Israelites to the Land God promised
- After a 40-year desert experience, the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua
- The Israelites were led by various Judges for a number of years until they demanded a king
- Their first King was Saul, followed by
- David, while not perfect, a great king... one after God's own heart
- Solomon succeeded his father as King, and built a spectacular temple for God's special presence
- Most of the Kings that followed Solomon failed, and the Israelites were divided into two Kingdoms: The Kingdom of Judah, and the Kingdom of Israel.

- The Kingdom of Israel (Northern Kingdom led from Samaria) fell to the Assyrians around 740 BC
- The Kingdom of Judah (Southern Kingdom led from Jerusalem) fell to the Babylonians around 600 BC

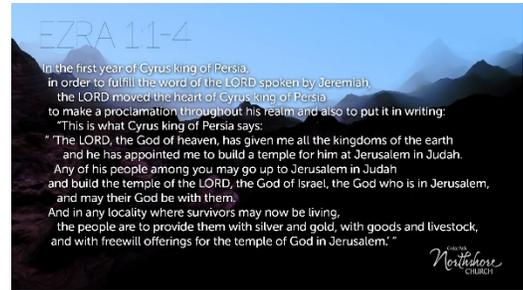
And that is where Ezra and Nehemiah enter the timeline.

After the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persian Empire, King Cyrus started a project around 540 BC that is recorded in the first verses of Ezra:

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 go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ⁴ And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’ ” ¹



Before we get into the *details* of the text, let’s make one more observation about the *big picture*... the *timeline* of all of this. Like I said, we’re pretty sure that the two books we have as Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one that was split into two... which is fine for organization and such; but I’m not sure why they didn’t split it into *three* since there are really three main figures with distinct efforts. I’m not sure why we don’t have, in addition to Ezra and Nehemiah, a book of **Zerubbabel**. He was the leader of this first effort to rebuild a Temple in Jerusalem, reestablishing worship in Jerusalem.

Restoration of worship was the first effort, followed by God’s Word, and the Walls surrounding Jerusalem.

Here’s another way to look at it:

Worship: Zerubbabel began work on rebuilding the Temple that was ransacked and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar



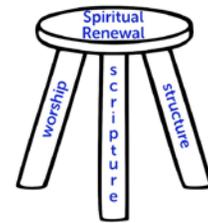
¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 1:1–4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Word: Ezra reestablished God’s Word among the people (70 years after Zerubbabel)

Walls: Nehemiah worked to *secure* the City, protecting the people (and the Temple and treasure) from enemies

Renewal: Ezra and Nehemiah, together, pursued spiritual renewal among the people.

I suppose there is a *template* for us here. If we are going to experience *spiritual renewal*, these three elements must be present:



1. **Worship:** God must be celebrated, adored, and obeyed as *the center of it all*
2. **Word:** God’s word, Scripture, must be our rule for faith and living
3. **Walls:** There are important practical matters of **structure** like disciplines, fellowship, and such that support and enable spiritual renewal

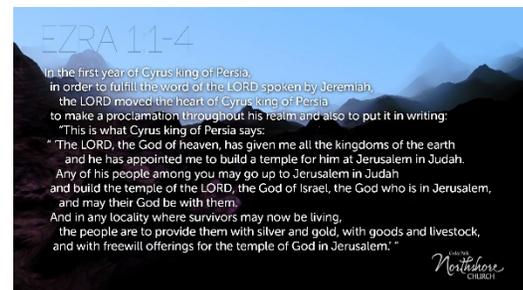
If one is broken, or even absent, the three-legged table will not stand to support spiritual renewal.

The decree that started off this restoration and rebuilding is fascinating.

“ The LORD, the God of heaven, [Yahweh] has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.²

I don’t know if you have noticed this... but powerful leaders often **overstate** their importance and power. Can you think of any examples, contemporary or historical? While Cyrus was overstating his rule and reign... as far as he knew he had conquered everything that he knew off. Even though there were civilizations beyond his reach and influence, he was leading the most powerful empire of his day... certainly that he knew of, and likely the single most powerful leader on the planet in that day. Cyrus had a lot in common with Donald Trump.

He said that Yahweh appointed him “to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.” Actually, it would be a **rebuild**... but here again, powerful leaders often fail to acknowledge the work accomplished before them (perhaps another thing he has in common with our present-day leaders... like Donald Trump).



² The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 1:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Yahweh, Cyrus said, put him in power and appointed him to build a temple. We might ask, “Was Cyrus a worshipper of Yahweh?” We might even wonder if Cyrus was a Jewish convert. While we might conclude that Cyrus was *some sort of* worshipper of Yahweh, we can be certain that he was not a Jewish convert.

We know something about Cyrus from other parts of our Bible. Cyrus shows up in Daniel. The prophet Daniel was among those removed from Jerusalem and taken into Babylonian captivity, when he was young. He was raised to be an advisor and leader, and had all sorts of interesting interactions with the leaders of Babylon and Persia (think *fiery furnaces* and *lions’ dens* for example)... but those are for other sermon series.

Nevertheless, we know that Daniel was a valued advisor to Cyrus and we can be certain that Cyrus knew about Yahweh (Daniel’s God).

It is likely that Cyrus worshipped Yahweh the way that he worshipped several gods. Cyrus was likely a polytheist, acknowledging many gods, particularly gods of certain people and regions. While Cyrus may have acknowledge our God, then known as Yahweh, as superior to other gods, even having something to do with his success... it is likely that he thought of Yahweh as the God of the Jews, the God of Judah and Jerusalem. To Cyrus, Yahweh was likely not God... merely a god.

We see that in the text when he refers to “**his** people” saying:

may *their* God be with them.³

Cyrus did not say that **our** God would be with **us**.

It seems that powerful leaders like to *keep all their options open*... even pandering to people of faith to keep the favor of those people and even their god. They acknowledge God in such a way that pretty much amounts to *lip service*. Perhaps you can think of other examples.

Often times it isn’t just a matter of *lip service* from those who may not be devout worshippers; it is, rather, a deliberate act of God. We see it here in verse 1:

the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing⁴

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ezr 1:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ezr 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The return to Jerusalem was an act of God moving on the heart of the King. Cyrus was right in saying that God put Cyrus in power. What may have been harder for Cyrus to admit or understand was that God was working powerfully through Cyrus. Government leaders may not always be worshippers of God, nevertheless God remains God, in control, working through kings and presidents and such.

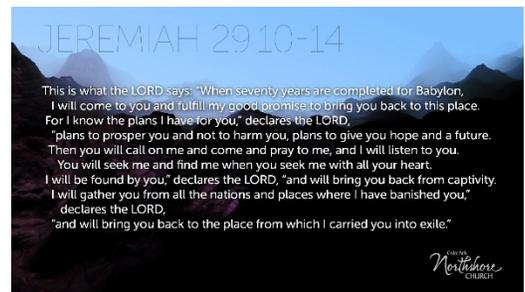
Here is the point I want to leave us with, the *so what* or *takeaway* **big idea** found in the very beginning of Ezra found in these words:

in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah⁵

God has a plan and purpose for His people... a plan that started at the beginning when humans first fell into sin... a plan/promise that was articulated to Abraham and preserved throughout the history of His people... and that plan would not be thwarted by the failings and disobedience of His people.

Before Jerusalem fell and God's people were carried off into Babylonian captivity, God renewed His promise in specific ways through the Prophet Jeremiah. Hear the Word of God:

¹⁰This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." ⁶



God's plan is always for restoration and rebuilding. His plan for His people then remains His plan for His people today. God has plans for you:

plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.⁷

This is why we worship. This is why we serve Him. This is why we are devoted to His Word. We can know that God's plans for us can be trusted because He has proven Himself to be trustworthy, over and over again, throughout history.

⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Je 29:10–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Je 29:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

You may have heard it said that past performance is the best predictor of future performance (a pretty good management truism). We can trust God's performance now, and His future performance, because of His past performance.

Some of us seem to read our Bible as if it is specifically and exclusively for us, not really appreciating the history of all those who have come before. It seems that some are even distracted or dismayed when we point out that God's promise through Jeremiah was first and specifically a promise for someone else, an ancient people on the other side of the world.

Actually the opposite is true. Because God delivered on His specific promise to His People 2,600 years ago we can trust God to deliver on that promise for us... for all of us and for each of us.

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. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,"

Here's another way to say it: **Promise Made – Promise Kept.**

Let's trust God today.

Allow God to renew that promise to you today. Let's devote ourselves to these three pillars of worship, Word, and structure... and let's see God renew us again.

Perhaps today is your day to start this journey of faith. For many here today it is simply another step forward with God, but today may be your first step, or a first step in a long time. Today is a day to believe. Allow God to restore and rebuild our lives.

