

Ezra 1:1-5 ^{NAU} 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, saying: ² "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. 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. ⁴ '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.'" ⁵ Then the heads of fathers' *households* 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.

The last time we were together we touched on a little history and the circumstances under which Cyrus decreed that the Jews were to go back to the land to rebuild the house of the Lord. It began with him defeating Babylon shortly after Belshazzar, was judged by God and his life would end.

Daniel 5:22-30 ²² "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, ²³ but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴ "Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. ²⁵ "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' ²⁶ "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE' -- God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ²⁷ "'TEKEL' -- you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ²⁸ "'PERES' -- your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians." ²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold

around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom. ³⁰ That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain.

One of the things we discussed last week was how a pagan king by the name of Cyrus would be compelled to return the Jews back to their land to rebuild the house of the Lord. And we saw how the Lord Himself stirred up the spirit of Cyrus. He may have done this through some personal revelation or He may have done it through the written word of God, particularly the book of Jeremiah and Isaiah, as Daniel may have shared it with him.

But it does raise the issue as to why God would use a pagan to accomplish His will in this or any matter relating to the plans of God.

Can you think of any instance where God raised up someone who was not one of His people to accomplish His will?

Pharaoh.

Romans 9:17-21 ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Rahab.

Hebrews 11:31 ³¹ By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Balaam.

Numbers 31:6-8 ⁶ Moses sent them, a thousand from each tribe, to the war, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war with them, and the holy vessels and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. ⁷ So they made war against Midian, just as the LORD had commanded Moses, and they killed every male. ⁸ They killed

the kings of Midian along with the *rest of* their slain: Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian; they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.

Numbers 31:14-16 ¹⁴ Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. ¹⁵ And Moses said to them, "Have you spared all the women?" ¹⁶ "Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

Judas.

Acts 1:16-20 ¹⁶ "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ "For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT'; and, 'LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.'

John 13:16-19 ¹⁶ "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸ "I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'HE WHO EATS MY BREAD HAS LIFTED UP HIS HEEL AGAINST ME.'
¹⁹ "From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*.

^{NAU} **Psalm 41:9** Even my close friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.

^{NAU} **Proverbs 16:4** The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil.

One of the things that you and I as human beings have a tendency to struggle with is our own independence and will. We believe that we are autonomous and no one will determine our futures, we'll make that choice.

And so, when we read things that makes it clear that God has a choice of His own that may not include our desires we balk. But if you think about it we spend our entire lives having someone make decisions for us that go against our will.

We need only start with our childhoods where every one of our parents were not too concerned with our wills when it conflicted with theirs especially at the dinner table or where we went to school and so on.

But even as adults we have people pushing their wills on us all the time and we don't seem to have a problem with that.

God is Sovereign over all His creation and His will is going to be accomplished even if we don't understand it all. But this God is a good God worthy to be praised for He does all things for His people to His glory.

Psalm 135:1-6 ^{NAU} Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD; Praise *Him*, O servants of the LORD, ² You who stand in the house of the LORD, In the courts of the house of our God! ³ Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; Sing praises to His name, for it is lovely. ⁴ For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession. ⁵ For I know that the LORD is great And that our Lord is above all gods. ⁶ Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

And so, as we come back to Ezra and the account that he records for us regarding the decree of Cyrus he makes it plain that this is ultimately the decree of the God of heaven and earth.

Ezra 1:2 ² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth..

We touched on this last time but does Cyrus recognize the Lord, the God of heaven as the one true God whom he worships alone?

Cyrus was a Persian and as such was influenced by the gods of Persia at the time. The Persians were polytheistic and so they worshipped many gods. But a rising religion at the time was Zoroastrianism named after the man Zoroaster. It was a religion based upon the premise of dualism, a cosmic conflict between good and evil where the gods battled out their differences here on earth.

The main good god was Ahura Mazda. And it would have been this god that Cyrus would have been most familiar.

In fact, this religion dominated the region of Persia, today known as Iran and India, until the arrival of Islam in the 7th Century AD. And there are still people in the world today who practice different forms of Zoroastrianism, primarily in India, known as the Parsis.

And so, when you have a pagan king who is a sort of gatekeeper to the gods for his people, acknowledging Jehovah, the God of heaven, it is amazing on its face that such could happen, except for the fact that God Himself moved the spirit of Cyrus.

Let's take a look at this decree. The first thing we notice is that Cyrus acknowledges that this Jehovah, the God of heaven, is the one responsible for giving him all the kingdoms of the earth, which again is amazing when you consider the prevalent gods in Persia at the time.

But in doing so what is he specifically doing that would encourage the hearts of the Jews in Babylon as it relates to the written word of God?

He is acknowledging that God's timetable is right on time. He promised them that He would allow them to languish in Babylon for 70 years.

Jeremiah 25:11-12 ¹¹ 'This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

And now, Cyrus is being used by God to fulfill the promise that they would return to the land.

Jeremiah 29:10-14 ¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ '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. ¹² 'Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ 'You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ 'I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'

There is no other explanation than that God is moving and His plan will not be thwarted and He will use the means He desires to accomplish His will, in this case Cyrus, whom He raised up for this specific purpose.

From a practical perspective why do you suppose God chose Cyrus to be the one through whom this return to Jerusalem would take effect, in light of the surrounding nations who might oppose such a move?

When the big kid on the block speaks others listen and mind their P's and Q's. And so, even though God doesn't need anyone but Himself to protect and defend His people He often times uses the means He chooses in this world to accomplish the same.

Ezra 1:2 and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Again, this is amazing that a pagan would recognize that this God of heaven would give him a specific task to build a temple for another group of people that did not include him. This is a testament that it is certainly God who turns kings or anyone into His servants as He desires.

Ezra 1:3 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.

So, what is Cyrus acknowledging about who belongs to this God of heaven?

He is the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And He is the God whose temple will be rebuilt.

And again, what are temples used for?

Places of worship. Cyrus seems to have no trouble building a place of worship for a God who is not his god, or the gods of Persia. If it were up to Cyrus this likely would never have entered into his heart or spirit, but the God who creates and the God who wills is the God who can move such people.

Now here's where the rubber meets the road. If such a monumental task is to take place what is the one thing you will need for such a building project?

Ezra 1:4 ⁴ '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.'"

What is Cyrus saying to the indigenous people of Babylon regarding the safe return of the Jews to their homeland so that they might worship the God of heaven?

They will support it whether they like it or not. I don't know about you but if someone tells me I have to pay for someone else's god and a temple dedicated to that god and also pay for that person to travel back to their land to worship this god, I'm going to have something to say about that.

But there will be no debate. The necessary things that will be needed for the people to go back to Jerusalem to build the temple and worship the God of heaven will be accomplished and it will be accomplished by the very God who moved the spirit of Cyrus to be a part of this plan.

But notice that God moves the spirits of others to accomplish His plan.

Ezra 1:5 ⁵ Then the heads of fathers' *households* 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.

The people who return to the city of David are the people God wants to return to the city of David for the task at hand. Not everyone went back. But the ones who did, we are told, God moved them to go back.

It is always the remnant that God calls to Himself, and we will see in the case of God bringing a people to Himself it is only by His strength and might and will that it will be accomplished for His glory.

Isaiah 46:3-13 ³ "Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, And all the remnant of the house of Israel, You who have been borne by Me from birth And have been carried from the womb; ⁴ Even to *your* old age I will be the same, And even to *your* graying years I will bear *you!* I have done *it*, and I will carry *you*; And I will bear *you* and I will deliver *you*. ⁵ "To whom would you liken Me And make Me equal and compare Me, That we would be alike? ⁶ "Those who lavish gold from the purse And weigh silver on the scale Hire a

goldsmith, and he makes it *into* a god; They bow down, indeed they worship it. ⁷ "They lift it upon the shoulder *and* carry it; They set it in its place and it stands *there*. It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; It cannot deliver him from his distress. ⁸ "Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. ⁹ "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; ¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned *it, surely* I will do it. ¹² "Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded, Who are far from righteousness. ¹³ "I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; And My salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, *And* My glory for Israel.

Notice the dichotomy here between God's promise to reestablish Israel and also the condemnation of Israel, and keep in mind that God brings only a remnant of the larger group of Israel back to the land. And it is in this sense that when God describes His salvation in Zion and His glory for Israel, He is not speaking about all of the physical descendants of Abraham, only those whom He chooses to bring to Himself.

And so, even here in Isaiah, God is making it clear that His nation called Israel, is not limited to a mere nation in the middle east, but a much larger group, known as His remnant, who are called by His name.

And this is precisely what Pau says.

Romans 9:3-8 ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, ⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, ⁵ whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. ⁶ But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel; ⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." ⁸ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

Paul knew that all of the promises made to Israel, on the one hand, seemed to have failed; the promise from God to bring His people into a land flowing with milk and honey. And after they arrived after many years and much rebellion they were driven out by God.

And then the promise that God would bring them back. And a remnant is brought back by God. But again they rebel and are conquered by pagans. And Paul is reminding his readers that even though these promises from God seemed to have failed they did not fail but were actually accomplished.

The problem was that people didn't understand that the promises made to God's people called Israel, His remnant, were not ultimately meant for a fleshly group called Israel.

Romans 9:6 ⁶ But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel;

Then who is this mysterious Israel? The children of the promise, those who have embraced this promise by faith. Israel was always based on this promise. Even during the days of Israel reigning in the land of promise there were those who, though of Israel, were not Israel from God's perspective.

Just reread Kings and Chronicles and Judges.

The children of the promise, who have the same faith as Abraham are regarded as the true Israel, the Israel of God.

Romans 2:28-29 ²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Galatians 6:14-16 ¹⁴ But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

A graphic picture of the Israel of God is being shown with the return of His people to the land as He and He alone brings them back to Himself and He uses Cyrus and the people of Babylon to accomplish this.

We look around us and we see the world hating us as they hated Christ, but in the end God will use even the people of the world, Babylon if you like, to bow down and acknowledge the King of kings and Lord of lords and the people He has called to Himself.

And you and I in Christ are the remnant that will one day be brought back into the land of promise that Abraham longed for as he looked for the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God, the kingdom of God and the hope of glory.