

Ezra ch1&2

Big Idea: *God is the King over all who brings back his people by means of the temple.*

Theme: God's kingship over powerful kings and care and supply of his people.

Purpose: To show them God's kingship, his keeping of his promise and his hand at work in these events.

Introduction:

At one point in the South Lawn ceremony, Bush noted that the queen had dined with 10 U.S. presidents and had helped the United States "celebrate its bicentennial in 1776" Bush caught himself and corrected the date to 1976." This brought loud laughter from many in the invited audience of thousands.

An embarrassed President tried to joke his way out of it.... that the queen just "gave me a look that only a mother could give a child."

WASHINGTON - The queen had the last

laugh. At the formal dinner she hosted for President Bush, Queen Elizabeth said, "I wonder whether I should start this toast by saying, 'When I was here in 1776.' "

Link:

Look at this book of Ezra over the next few weeks. Encourage us to trust and love and honour our God more and more.

1. God is King over Kings and world events.

Ezra ch1 shows us that God is King - over Kings and world events

God is King of Kings

You can see from verse 1-2 that God is the King of Kings. Because he rules King Cyrus.

Cyrus is called King of Persia here. He had actually captured the superpower based in Babylon – the nation that had captured Judah, so he commanded a super-superpower empire in the 6th century BC.

King Cyrus was the world power of his day, but he wasn't the world's king.

1 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 to put it in writing:

However powerful Cyrus is ... God moves his heart. God causes him to do something that God wants done. There is a king and a king of kings.

God is using Cyrus but not by hypnosis or as an unconscious puppet. Cyrus knows what he is doing and he serves God willingly.

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.

Cyrus knows 3 things.

1. God's name and nature. *" 'The LORD, the God of heaven*

2. that God is in charge of everything and has gives power. *has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.*

3a

3. that God has given him a task to do. *he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.*

Job to do. When we go on holiday I ask Mary for jobs to do because I know who's in charge of packing and preparation.

How does he know all this? - it could be a divine bolt from the blue but it could also be God's hand at work in miraculous but far more ordinary looking circumstances.

e.g. Daniel – as in the bloke in the book of Daniel.

Daniel was a young man when the Babylonians invaded Judah and smashed Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and exported everyone of any importance.

But Daniel grew up in the Babylonian civil service and arose to a position of power 2nd only to the King of Babylon himself. Daniel also remained faithful to the LORD.

So when Darius the Mede and then after him

3b

Cyrus the Persian took over the kingdom of Babylon there was Daniel, on hand, full of experience, knowledge and wisdom about running the kingdom. Daniel who also read God's word.

God had promised to send the Babylonians to punish Israel for rebelling and turning away from him. God did it. But he also promised to restore Israel after a time.

e.g. What is that promise God gave Jeremiah that we heard about in v1?

Probably refers to Jeremiah ch29 – Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles stuck in Babylon.

1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

He tells them that they are going to be there

a while. Live life and grow as a people.

10 *This 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. **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.*

That's the promise God is keeping in the book of Ezra (& Nehemiah). To bring them back after 70years. Give them a hope and a future with him.

Daniel might have shared that with King Cyrus. He may also have shown him the prophesy of Isaiah ch44v24-28,

24 *"This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things,
26 who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,*

of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' ...

28 *who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid." '*

Written almost 2 centuries before Cyrus appeared.

It might well be Daniel showing him God's Word which has convinced Cyrus that God is telling him to do this. If someone showed me a 200 year old prophesy containing my name and a task to do I'd be gobsmacked and listen hard to what it said.

Either way – God is the King that King Cyrus is obeying.

Not just obeying the minimum but seeking to do it well. Let me read the whole proclamation he wrote.

'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 Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him - let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.

4 And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "

Cyrus is losing a mass of people from all over the central region who will return to Jerusalem – about 50,000 people who went at this time.

But he also tells his own people to give the Israelites what they need to do it. Money, goods, herds of sheep, cattle & goats. And then on top of this sudden extra tax to also give freewill offerings for the temple they would build.

Now bearing in mind that the offering would have shown what you thought of this God; and the new King seems very keen; if you are in any position of the new government of Persia I'm guessing that you gave generously.

Even more so when you hear that Cyrus is returning from the treasury all the silver and gold taken from the original temple.

7 Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god.

...

11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver.

And all this is just given to Sheshbazzar who is going to oversee the project. "There you are..."

God is the King that King Cyrus obeys, follows, honours...

That's the amazing and awesome God that Ezra shows us was at work in doing all this.

It's a bit like if the USA decided that it had acted wrongly during the war of independence against Britain. The Queen was their rightful ruler. But instead of just issuing a press statement they decided to return to Britain every item of value that it had seized or possessed at that time 200 odd years ago.

God is not just King over Kings, he is also King of world events.

Important to see the whole book in terms of v1. *in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, - 70 years of exile.* (you can measure the 70 years from different events but it can make 70 so I'm not going to get into that) That's what's on view in this book – God keeping that promise.

Because its not just world kings that are

under God's authority its world events and world history itself.

History in the bible is called salvation history because it describes what God is doing and has promised to do in order to save his people and bring them to himself. And the solid certainties in this are God's promises.

When God pulled his people out of Egypt and made them a nation he promised or covenanted with them that they would be his people.

Problem was that they were human beings. Disobedient and dishonouring God. Failing God and each other. How could they – how could any people – be worthy of being God's people. Grab hold of that and you have the key issue that runs through the OT and more.

- 1 God is a holy God who cannot tolerate sin.
- 2 Israel are sinful human beings.

3 God promises that they will be his people.
(repeat?)

Everything that happens has something to do with that tension.

When God warns Israel about their sin and their worship of other Gods – over a long time - its their refusal to turn back to him which leads to God sending Assyria to destroy the northern half and eventually leads to the southern nation of Judah being exiled.

(That's why v2 talks about Jerusalem being in Judah rather than capital of the 12 tribes of Israel and that's why ch2 only lists the families in the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and the Levites – that was what was left of Israel when the Babylonians came).

But when the exile happens you can see how it is a result of the first two things... READ 1 & 2 but it looks like no. 3 (READ) is out.

But even then there were clear prophecies

about their return as we've seen in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even in the midst of his judgment on them for their consistent rebellion God is still saying – yes they are my people. I will bring them back.

The history that the bible gives us is not just reliable history – its history with the real perspective – that God is king over world events. You want to know what's happening in the OT – its God keeping his promises. Not giving up an once of his holiness – nor giving in to human sinfulness – but keeping his promise to make his people, his people.

World events are still guided by God today – but he is working across nations and ethnic groups to gather his people. No nation – including modern day Israel – has his promise of blessing or protection. The only remaining promise of human history to be fulfilled is the return of Jesus and the end of history.

2. God is bringing his people back to him by means of the temple.

How it is specifically that God is keeping this promise here in Ezra?

Promised Land

Firstly he is bringing his people back to Jerusalem – where he promised that they would live with him (originally to Abraham about 6 centuries before it first happened - Gen ch13). The punishment of the exile is over.

Temple

But when they get back they aren't going to build walls, farms, industry, etc... In the midst of a ruined city with little or no infrastructure they are building a temple as the first order of business.

Not just because that's Cyrus' orders but because their most urgent need is to be able to worship God and make sacrifices for their sins.

More than anything else if they are to be God's people they must worship Him rightly and they must offer an animal to be a sin substitute before God.

And to do that before Jesus came you needed a temple with an altar. And you needed Levite priests as God had commanded.

So in ch2 as you get this long list of names you see that Ezra takes the time to tell you the Levite families – including singers and gatekeepers. But also people who said but couldn't prove that they were from the priestly clan of Levi. And we are told that they weren't allowed to take up priestly roles until they had been proved positive by the casting of Urim and Thummim. (God given means of guidance in certain circumstances) All that is so that we know its being done properly.

The first priority of people who want to be God's people is the temple.

Application:

The temple was and is the way that God brings people back to himself. The temple is how God fulfils his promise to make sinful people his people.

Jesus said that he was to be the new temple (John ch2), Hebrews – new and living way (Heb 10v19ff), no temple in heaven. Rev 21v22)

Jesus' innocent death on the cross in place of our guilt before God is what allows those 3 things in tension in the OT to be resolved in the NT.

1. God is holy, 2. We are sinful but – trusting in Jesus' sacrifice for us – are declared holy too.

Heb 10v19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God

We enter the temple by faithful surrender to Jesus. We see Jesus and we know that the sacrifice has been made, the priest is qualified and that we meet with God.

The first order of business is the temple.

If its not our first order of business then it shouldn't surprise us if we have trouble meeting with God. Not that we come to church but that we come to Jesus.

More about the temple next week.

I'd like to leave us thinking on God the King of us, today.

God as the Holy and only God is the start and every breath of the Christian life.

Glory in God's sovereignty

This is our God.

We are to read Ezra – as with all the Bible episodes – and say 'This is my God'.

He is awesome. Literally – he inspires awe in me. Its referred to as God’s glory.

And where we don’t see God in his glory and awesomeness we won’t find living faith. READ your bible in expectation of seeing and meeting with this God.

And we are to glory in it. Bask in the fact that the sovereign God; over superpowers and history and the future cares for me. That through Jesus he is my God.

First thing – glory in God’s sovereignty

Walk only in God’s promises.

Our plans and ambitions might fail, or worse might succeed.

Job we’ve always wanted – hours and the responsibility take too much out of us. Infighting makes us paranoid.

Even if we succeed it won’t be enough. For our finances or relationships or security.

Never be enough for our souls.

But God’s promises hold firm and they do us good. Time and time again the bible shows us that God’s promises are true and solid.

I don’t think it was easy being defeated, force marched to a foreign city and having to make a new life there for 70 years. That’s seeing in the grandchildren or even great grandchildren whilst saying God is faithful to his promise.

What a fantastic example to us of holding onto God’s promises.

Jeremiah 29v11 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.

Loneliness

God promises to love us even if all others leave ... and to provide us with family in Christ.

Financial burdens

God promises that if we put his kingdom first he will supply our needs.

Specific

The most clear declared purpose of God to us as his church today is that people need to hear the gospel, respond in faith and repent. We need to take the gospel to as many as we can.

But God's promises hold firm and they do us good. Find them. Walk in them. Never be let down.