

Ezra 1

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to the passage that we read in Ezra chapter 1. And before we give thought to the chapter itself, a kind of overview of the chapter, I just want to say a little bit to introduce Ezra and the period of history where Ezra lived and ministered. So, in terms of the identity of Ezra, the first that we're told about him is in chapter 7. So, we'll have to skip chapter 1 and right through to chapter 7 to learn about him. In fact, the first chapters of Ezra don't deal with Ezra. Ezra only appears on the scene in chapter 7. So, if we want to know something about him, we need to head there. So, let's just quickly read this very short biography, really, of him that introduces him there in chapter 7. We read there at the beginning of the chapter, after these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, son of Zariah, the son of

Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shalom, the son of Zadok, the son of Achetub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zariah, the son of Uzi, the son of Buki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the chief priest, this Ezra came up from Babylon. So, just in case you mix him up with some other Ezra, you know, you're given a pretty clear view of which Ezra we're talking about. So, this Ezra came up from Babylon. And then notice what it says about him. He was a teacher well versed in the law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked. And then notice also something very significant that it says about Ezra. For the hand of the Lord, his God was on him. So, maybe the two really key things that we want to draw about Ezra from that short bio is, first of all, who he was, what he did, what his ministry was. He was a teacher well versed in the law of Moses, something that the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem were very much in need of. And we'll come to try and work out the timings of that in a moment. So, a teacher well versed in the law of Moses. And then the second key thing to notice there in chapter 7 is that the hand of the Lord, his God, was on him. Notice also there that he's introduced as one who came up from

Babylon, came up from Babylon, implicit to Jerusalem. And that then provides us with a period of history that we're dealing with, of the exile to Babylon and the return from Babylon. And while we've already read the chapter, and even certainly two of our singings have made reference to that. So, Ezra came from Babylon. He was an exile himself. He came from Babylon to minister to the exiles who had returned previously to Jerusalem. Now, we want to just locate Ezra, the book, and the man in history. And I've got a slide here that should give us some idea that we can try and locate him. So, we'll see if this works.

This should be fun. So, let's see. What do I have to do? Oh, there we go. Okay, can you see that? Oh, actually, on the TVs, it's better than on the big screen. So, I don't need to look at that, because I've got it in my paper here. So, this is just to give you a rough idea of the key dates in this period of history. So, a key date in the Old Testament, key for so many reasons, is 586 BC. So, we're talking, what, two and a half thousand years ago, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, by Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, he's mentioned in chapter 1 as the one who took the artifacts from the temple from Jerusalem to Babylon following this conquest and this brutal destruction of Jerusalem. And following that, the Jews, not all of them, but a significant number of them from the southern kingdom of Judah were taken into exile. So, we're talking about the tribes of

Judah, Benjamin, and also some of the Levites, the priestly tribe. So, that was in 586. The next date that's relevant and particularly relevant to our consideration of this book of Ezra is 538.

[4 : 38] And in that year, Cyrus, who's mentioned there at the beginning of the chapter, the king of Persia, defeats the Babylonians. And immediately, really, or within months, certainly, of defeating the Babylonians, he issues a decree authorizing, and not only authorizing, but also facilitating the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. So, the destruction or the conquest of the Babylonians followed within a year by this decree. So, that's the next relevant date to have in your mind. Immediately, or certainly within weeks or months, a number of exiles return to Jerusalem. I'm calling it the first wave, though really, to call it a wave is somewhat generous. Probably a trickle would be a more appropriate word, because most of the Jews chose not to return to Jerusalem. We're not going to explore the reasons for that, but that's the historical reality. It was only a committed core, really, who were of a mind to make use of this liberty that they had been given to return to Jerusalem. Many had settled in

Babylon and really had no desire to leave. But again, that's another story. On their arrival in Jerusalem, and as we'll see in a moment when we go through the chapter, really the main reason for going to Jerusalem was to build the temple. That's what it was about, from Cyrus' perspective, curiously, but also from the perspective of the returning exiles. And so, the rebuilding of the temple begins, you'll notice there that it's 20 years before the conclusion of the building of the temple in 516 BC. They weren't building for all that time. There were ups and downs, there were obstacles, there was opposition, and so it took longer than it would have taken had it been just in a oner, as it were. Then, in terms of the book of Ezra, you have a period of about 50 years where we're not told anything. The book doesn't talk about that. So, the first six chapters covers the period that I've been making reference to, but then there's this big gap of about 50 years, and we kind of reconnect with history, or Ezra reconnects with history in 458 BC with the arrival of Ezra. So, you notice that Ezra is coming to minister to the exiles many decades, several decades after the first wave or trickle, whatever you want to call it, returned to Jerusalem. We're talking, what, 80 years, a significant period of time has elapsed. Now, we'll also notice this doesn't really relate much to the book of Ezra, but just to mention another familiar name to help you kind of locate things. A decade or so later, from Ezra's return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah comes. So, the temple had been built, but then Nehemiah comes, and as we know, he was responsible for the building of the wall to provide security to the city. And Ezra and Nehemiah overlapped for some years there in Jerusalem. Also worth noting, I think it's up there on the screen as well, is that two prophets familiar to us, because their prophecies are recorded for us in the Old Testament, Haggai and Zechariah are recorded as ministering at the time of the temple rebuilding. They're mentioned by name in chapter 5, verse 1. Now, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. And it seems that their particular concern was to encourage them to continue and to conclude the construction of the temple. So, that's more or less the history or locating ourselves in history. What about Cyrus? Cyrus is the first character mentioned in the book of Ezra.

Well, who was he? Well, Cyrus, or as he is known in history, Cyrus the Great was, as the book identifies him there in verse 2, the king of Persia, the emperor of the Persian kingdom. He was the son of Cambyses I and a grandson of Cyrus I. And he had defeated the Medes that geographically would be located in what is today northwest Iran, and then immediately after conquered the Babylonians, as we've already commented in 539 BC. And he ruled over an empire that stretched from Greece to India. We've got a map here. Let's see how we get on here. Right. So, this gives you some sense of the scale of the Persian empire. And so, you see in page Egypt, you'll notice there that the conquest of Egypt was subsequent to Cyrus the Great, his son. But then from up there, you see the Mediterranean Sea, just above the Mediterranean Sea, you're talking Turkey and just creeping into Greece right across the Middle East and right through what today would be Iraq, Iran, and right towards India. So, it was a massive empire that Cyrus ruled over. Cyrus himself, though he came to power in 538 or so, he eventually died in battle in 530 BC. And the Persian Empire that continued following his demise. His son took over and then subsequent kings. The Persians were eventually conquered by Alexander the Great some 200 years later. So, obviously, Alexander the Great, a massive figure in world history. So, it was the

Persians who were conquered by Alexander the Great, among others. Now, the interesting thing, again, just by way of kind of introduction, another interesting detail that it's worth noting is that there is a very significant piece of external evidence concerning the events recorded in Ezra, and very particularly the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. And that external evidence is found in what's called the Cyrus Cylinder. And I've got a wee picture of that. So, that's the Cyrus Cylinder. If you ever want to see it, you can go to the British Museum. That's where it's kept. And the Cyrus Cylinder really is a record of Cyrus the Great's rule. It would have been produced by Cyrus, or he would have commissioned it, probably towards the beginning of his reign. And not only did it record some of the events of the beginning of his reign, but also some of his political philosophy, which was marked by a religious tolerance that was quite unusual at that time. And we see it reflected in the events of Ezra.

And so, it's interesting because in this clay, you have reference to events that are mentioned in Ezra. So, this is external evidence confirming the biblical account. It doesn't mention these things in the detail that we have, of course, in Ezra, but there is references that coincide. So, that's the Cyrus Cylinder. And we'll come back to that on one or two occasions in the next 10 or 15 minutes.

[11 : 56] What I want to do this evening is just give a very brief overview. Having given this introduction, now give a very brief overview of chapter 1 from the perspective of what the chapter reveals to us about God. And I think in this chapter that we've read, three truths stand out. First of all, the purposes and promises of God. Of course, the purposes and promises are very much interrelated in that the promises issue from the purposes of God. So, the purposes and promises of God stand out very prominently in this chapter. But then a second truth about God that stands out is the power of God and particularly focusing on the language that is used on two occasions in the chapter of how the Lord moved the heart of. And that power that God had to move the heart of Cyrus, but also of his own people. So, the power of God. But the third truth concerning God that I think we can draw out from this chapter towards the end of the chapter and draw it out from a rather curious or in a rather curious way is the preserving grace of God. Okay, so yeah, there we've got it. The promises or the purposes and promises of God, the power of God, and the preserving grace of God. That's more or less what we're going to cover very fleetingly in the next few minutes. So, we can take that image off the screen and just move on and begin with that first one, the purposes and promises of God.

Chapter 1 begins with a, you might say, a matter-of-fact presentation of historical events or of a historical event from two parallel perspectives, namely the actions of a man, of a world leader, of huge power and reputation, but in parallel the same event presented from the perspective of the overruling and guiding hand of God. You see it very clearly in that first verse. In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, if we jump, or if we just read it through, 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. So, if you want to talk about secular history, and that's probably not the right phrase to use, but let's use it for want of a better expression, what is clear is that Cyrus issued this proclamation. You know, that you can confirm from other sources. This world leader issued a proclamation, and you can look at that from a political perspective of why he did it, and what it involved, and all the rest of it. So, that's one perspective of the event. But Ezra very naturally combines that with this parallel perspective that the reason he does so is in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah. Indeed, not only that, but that God moves his heart in order that he would do this. So, these two parallel perspectives merge very naturally in one statement there at the beginning of the chapter. Cyrus took a decision. He made a proclamation, but he did so unbeknown to him in order to fulfill the word of the Lord. But what word of the Lord is being referred to? Well, we're told, not specifically, but we are told that it was the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah. And it seems, I think, very reasonable to presume that the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah that is being referred to is what we read in Jeremiah chapter 29 verses 10 and 11. And let me just read these two verses. This is what the Lord says, when 70 years are completed for Babylon,

I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place, that is to Jerusalem. 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. So, here's Jeremiah. He's anticipating not only the exile, but the return from exile following this period of 70 years when the Jews will return to Jerusalem.

And what the writer of Ezra is stating is that Cyrus did what he did in order to fulfill this word of the Lord. Now, those of you who maybe are doing the sums, because we did the, you know, we put up the years there on the screen, may be wondering why the numbers don't seem to add up. Jeremiah speaks of 70 years, 70 years of exile. And yet the time between the destruction of Jerusalem and the decree of Cyrus is only just about 50 years, in fact, just under 50 years. And any number of possible solutions have been offered to this seeming discrepancy. I'm not going to, you know, go over them this evening. All I would say is that I'm drawn to maybe a very simple perspective of viewing the 70 years as equivalent to a generation.

It's kind of a round number. One generation will pass before the exiles are able to return. As some have suggested, and I'm kind of drawn to this or attracted by this, I don't say that this is the case. I wonder if we might also see the early fulfillment, if we want to call it an early fulfillment, as simply evidence of the grace of God as He shortens the sentence given to His people.

[17:37] Let's not forget the people are in Babylon under the judgment of God. And surely it's within God's prerogative if He so chooses to shorten the sentence that He had determined. Well, it's a possibility that I throw out there. Now, the writer of Ezra makes specific reference to Jeremiah, but Isaiah also prophesied concerning these events. In Isaiah 44, we can just notice what Isaiah says. Now, the interesting thing about Isaiah, of course, is that he predates Jeremiah significantly, and he's writing some 200 years before the events described, which makes what he says all the more startling.

In Isaiah 44, and in verse 24, we read, this is what the Lord says, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb. I am the Lord who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself. And then let's just jump to verse 28, who says of Cyrus, very fascinating, even mentioned by name, 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. So, this is Isaiah writing long before the events, long before Cyrus had even appeared in the scene of history, and speaking in very specific terms of how Cyrus would be used by God. God has a purpose for His world and for His people, and that purpose of redemption and restoration issues in promises to His people. His purpose has never been, nor ever will be frustrated, and His promises have ever and ever will be proved true and trustworthy. God keeps His Word. So, standing very, very prominently within this chapter is this reality concerning the purposes and promises of God. But then also very prominent in this chapter is the power of God. In order for God's purposes to be fulfilled, in order for God's promises to be kept, God needs to be powerful. And, you know, we can have plans, sincerely held and carefully constructed plans, but we can't guarantee their execution because we don't have the power often. We don't have the resources. Circumstances contrive against us, and so we have this wonderful plan, and it is never executed. We can make promises in good faith and then find that we're unable to keep those promises.

God never suffers from such limitations because His purposes and His promises are undergirded, if you wish, by His power to fulfill them and to keep them. And this is what we find that this chapter very much illustrates. God fulfills His purposes and keeps His promises because He has the power to do so. And I want to focus on the striking language of verses 1 and 5. The Lord moved the heart. He moved the heart of Cyrus. He moved the heart of His people. First of all, He moved the heart of Cyrus. Now, what do we know of Cyrus' heart? Well, we have the evidence in the text in Ezra, particularly in the proclamation that he made concerning this return of the Jews. And in that proclamation, he gives some indication as to his convictions, his beliefs concerning God, there in verses 2 to 4. And he seems to have a high view of God. He describes God as the God of heaven.

He seems to sincerely acknowledge God's sovereign power in granting Him His empire. He says there that God has given me the kingdoms of the earth. That's what he says about the God of heaven, the God of Israel. And so, we have the evidence of the proclamation recorded in Ezra, but we also have the external evidence provided by the Cyrus' cylinder that was up on the screen a few moments ago.

And the inscription on the cylinder tells of Cyrus' allegiance to Marduk, the God of the Babylonians, and of his respect for the gods of his subject peoples, including the Jews, but also many others.

[22 : 05] But the other thing that's very interesting in this inscription on the cylinder is that Cyrus expresses his aspiration or his hope that in return for his benign treatment of his subject peoples, the gods of those peoples would pray daily for him to the God of Babylon. So, these minor gods would pray to this greater God that he owes allegiance to on his behalf. So, there we see a man who was very much a pagan in terms of his convictions. So, how do we reconcile these two sources? Well, I think the language of the proclamation recorded here in Ezra, it may be sincere on the part of Cyrus. We don't have reason to doubt his sincerity, but it's perhaps the language of diplomatic courtesies. Well, this is the way the Jews speak about their God. Well, you know, I can use that same language as a matter of diplomacy. Also note that even in the proclamation, Cyrus speaks in that proclamation of the God who is in Jerusalem. Now, that's also quite interesting, you know, the God who is in Jerusalem, which would suggest that he sees the God of Israel as a regional deity. That's where he lives. That's where he has some power. He's the God who is in Jerusalem, not the God who rules over all. So, in conclusion,

Zairus' heart, though there are redeeming features undoubtedly to him, it was a pagan heart. It was an unbelieving heart. But what do we know about God's moving his heart? Well, we know, first of all, that it was not the first time. Isaiah, we won't look up the reference for reasons of time, but Isaiah speaks of how God would raise up one to conquer the Babylonians. So, before even issuing a decree that would allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, of course, the Babylonians had to be conquered.

And Isaiah anticipates God raising up Cyrus to do that, moving his heart, if you wish, to secure this preliminary but necessary objective. But then on this occasion, which we are particularly interested in, God moves in his heart with the result that Cyrus issues his proclamation. And again, what's recorded on the Cyrus cylinder is fascinating in that regard. There in the cylinder, among all the other things that it says, it speaks about the holy cities beyond the Tigris, whose sanctuaries have been in ruins over a long period. I return to their places. So, Cyrus speaks in the first person. He's saying, this is what I did. When I came to power, this is what I did. I heard about temples and sanctuaries that were in ruins. Will I return them to their places. That's what I did. And as I say, this is an external source of evidence that speaks of these actions on the part of Cyrus. How did God move his heart? Did Cyrus know of the prophecies that Ezra makes reference to? I suspect he probably didn't, though some suggest he might have done. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, records a story in which Cyrus, reading Isaiah's prophecy about how he would lift up the foundations of Jerusalem and build the temple, he was so impressed with the divine power to tell the future that he sought to fulfill what was written about him. Well, it's a curious story, but there's really no corroborating evidence to suggest that that's what happened. Just to add a little bit of interest to any kind of,

I don't know if you'd call them conspiracies or theories, but certainly speculation around this, Daniel, we're told, you know, he lived through many emperors and indeed empires right through to Cyrus. And it would seem that he was somebody who was still within the court, within the cottages of power. Who knows? Maybe Daniel brought these things to Cyrus's attention. We don't know. It's purely speculation. A more likely explanation is that God used the political ambitions and policies of Cyrus to fulfill his purposes of restoration. Cyrus's astute policy led to peace and contentment among the peoples under Persian jurisdiction. So, God moved the heart of Cyrus, and Cyrus, in all probability, didn't even notice that that's what was happening. And I think that explanation, I think it's more likely to be true, but it's also very encouraging for us. God is the same, and God today is moving the hearts of kings and presidents and prime ministers, and they don't even notice that that's what's happening.

We don't know how he's doing that. We don't know with what purpose is in mind, with what he aims to secure by it. But we have no reason to believe that he acts any differently today than he did in the time of Cyrus. Such is his power. That's really the point we're emphasizing.

[27 : 11] Notice also that from God's perspective, Cyrus's most significant achievement was not to build this huge empire that extended from Greece to India, but his most significant achievement was to, and to quote just word for word the words of Isaiah, to build my city and set my exiles free. You know, maybe from Cyrus's perspective, that was a footnote, but from God's perspective, that was the most significant thing that this man did. He moved the heart of Cyrus to reflect his power, but he also moved the hearts of his people. Now, he didn't move the hearts of all the people. God chose to work with the willing, and to do what? Well, to return to Jerusalem. Yes, but more significantly, to rebuild the temple. This was not about nostalgia for home, but zeal for God's name and God's worship.

Notice that even in the language of the proclamation in verses 2 to 4, the languages of the exiles going up to Jerusalem, which is the language of worship, it almost makes you wonder if there wasn't some Jewish involvement in the drafting of this proclamation. And again, you wonder, might Daniel have been involved or some other Jew, because it's very much Hebrew language going up to Jerusalem.

Difficult to imagine that Cyrus would have drafted with such an expression, but it focuses on the key element, which is the worship of God. That's the key element, not the rebuilding of a city, but the rebuilding of a temple for the worship of God. And this is what they were about. So, he moved the heart of Cyrus. He moved the heart of God's people, and he moved the heart of the neighbors. Just in a fleeting throwaway line, we notice how in verse 6, it doesn't use the language of he moved the hearts, but it speaks of how the neighbors provided resources. These neighbors may have been non-returning Jews, some of them, but certainly they would also have been Babylonians and Persians. There's an echo of the exodus, isn't there? We remember the Egyptians provided the resources for the first exodus, and this is almost like a second exodus, and the neighbors generously provide for the needs of this grand enterprise. Then finally, we've thought about the purposes and promises of God, the power of God to move hearts, but then finally the preserving grace of God, from verse 7 through to verse 11. Now, the whole of the book of Ezra is grounded in this theme or truth, but I just want to focus on the temple artifacts as a vivid illustration of this truth. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar heads to Jerusalem, destroys the city, ransacks the temple, destroys the temple, and gathers all these artifacts of gold and silver in the midst of all the chaos of that destruction. And he takes them back to Babylon, and decades pass, and Nebuchadnezzar dies, and others take his place in the corridors of power in Babylon. And yet, all this time later, 50 years later, what do we find? We find that they're all there intact, present and correct, all of these artifacts from the temple. Now, that in itself is quite remarkable. You know, just in the past year or so, we've moved from, we were in Bon Accord, and then we had to move out of Bon Accord to head to

Hilton for a few months, and then return to Bon Accord. And the whole process was carried out with, I think, great care and efficiency, and there was inventories made, and things stored in different places, and largely most of the things that were stored have returned to their place. But there's always things that have gone missing. And we're thinking, oh, where's that? Where did that go? Where did we put that? That doesn't seem to have reappeared. Now, that's just a tiny little move from one part of the city to another part of the city. And yet, here we have something where a whole city is destroyed, and all these artifacts are gathered. They're taken halfway across the world. Decades pass, and yet, there they are. They're all waiting for their return to the temple. And using the logic of the lesser to the greater, we can take encouragement from this. If God preserved inanimate artifacts, how much more will He preserve His people? You know, this is the logic of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus teaches about the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. If God cares for the birds of the air, how much more will He care for us? If He clothes the flowers of the field, how much more will He provide for us? There's a little chorus in Spanish that translates, and it's just taken from the

Sermon on the Mount. If He cares for the little birds, He'll also care for you. And I can imagine the Jews, as they saw these artifacts being brought out, and they looked on in amazement. They're all there. They're all there. I wonder if, as they saw them all being gathered together for the journey to Jerusalem. I wonder if they came to a similar conclusion. If God has preserved even the artifacts of the temple, surely He will continue to protect and preserve us as we return to Jerusalem, to an unknown and perhaps rather frightening future. So, these three great truths about God that we can draw out from this chapter, the purposes and promises of God, the power of God to move hearts, even the hearts of kings and emperors, and the preserving grace of God. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for who You are. We thank You for what it reveals of who You are. We thank You for Your great purposes that have never been frustrated nor ever will be frustrated. We thank You for the promises that You have made to us and that are altogether trustworthy and reliable. We thank You that You are a

[33 : 08] God of all power, and You are a God who graciously preserves and protects Your people. And we thank You for all of these things as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.