

## Return: Gracious Providence Ezra 1-2

**Introduction:** "If God is omnipotent why do tragedies like earthquakes and hurricanes happen? No religious leader has ever been able to answer that for me." This was a question posed on Larry King's Twitter account this past Thursday (Larry King - @kingsthings). In light of the devastation in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and Mexico in the past few weeks, this question, or some version of it, has been the mind of countless people. **How would you answer this?** Have you thought about the repercussions of the answer, or would you rather just ignore the brain cramp it takes to wrestle with it? The reality is this: *this question is impossible to answer, and has no satisfying one.....IF WE VIEW LIFE* through a lens that starts with us and moves outward, and IF WE JUDGE GOD based on our scale of justice and righteousness, and IF WE BELIEVE we are by nature **good**, deserving heaven, rather than punishment for our sin.

These are the questions we deal with in life and especially in the Old Testament as we are exposed to the attributes of God that we do not like to talk about at parties or with neighbors. This part of God must have a huge amount of context or He seems like a vindictive, mean, curmudgeon. It's the part of His nature that we talked about last week, that He promised and carried out judgment against Israel and Judah by the hand of Babylon, and then promised and carried out judgment against Babylon at the end of 70 years (see Jeremiah 25:11-12). This does not compute in our minds, nor does it seem **fair**. But as we have stated many times we cannot define God in terms of our measure of fairness, because if that were so, we would all be in trouble. If God were *fair*, to be consistent, He would have to punish each of us according to our sin, deeds, and motives, which would leave us under His wrath eternally. So we are left not with questioning God's fairness, but left with trying to understand how a perfectly just God can allow evil to go on and on.

The answer: **grace**. Lavish, relentless, undeserved grace that He gives to all mankind and particularly to those who would believe. Grace is something we cannot earn, that we do deserve, and cannot demand. You will invariably have questions of God's goodness throughout Ezra and Nehemiah, but we must train our thinking to default to seeing everything through the lens of grace, not fairness. We looked last week at the continual sinfulness of His people in the land of Israel, God giving them opportunity after opportunity to return and repent, yet they continued to harden their hearts and double down on their treachery. This was not a lack of grace, but the exercise of righteousness and justice. The fact that God would allow His people **back into the land at all** screams of His goodness, lovingkindness, and patience. He did this because He is a promise keeping God, but also so He can pour out His grace on us today. The people of Israel coming back to the land meant the line of Messiah was not over, the future of redemption was not dead, and grace for salvation would still be present. This grace is experienced through **providence**, *God's active hand without hearing His direct voice, His moving through people, history, and His Word to accomplish His will and to redeem His own*. That is what we are going to see today: **God's gracious providence**.

### Gracious Providence Means God is Active When He is Silent

**Ezra 1:1** In the first year of **Cyrus king of Persia**, that the word of the LORD by **the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled**, the LORD **stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia**, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: <sup>2</sup> "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. <sup>3</sup> Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and 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. <sup>4</sup> And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the

men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." <sup>5</sup> Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, **everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go** up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

### **In the Affairs of History**

The first thing we note in the very first verse of Ezra is that of a historical reference. We are introduced to Cyrus of Persia. He started as the king of the small state of Anshan near the Persian gulf, and displaced his overlord Astyages in 549 B.C, inheriting the vast Median empire which overarches the Babylonian empire to the North and East. In **539 B.C**, Babylon fell to him without a struggle, and he was seen as a liberator, even among the Babylonian people.<sup>1</sup> Cyrus is seen as a progressive king who gave one of the first charters of human rights, called the **Cyrus Cylinder** (see screen for a picture). The size of a small ear of corn, this was discovered in modern Iraq in 1879 and explains the accomplishments of Cyrus, how he gave credit to the Babylonian god *Marduk* (which is why Babylon liked him), and began a systematic declaration that conquered peoples could once again worship the gods of their own heritage. He even would send back the religious articles that Babylon had taken during their reign. Clearly, this was done for political advantage, since it meant the good will of those under rule, and as a consistent polytheist, gave credit to the gods of different places. The Jews or Jerusalem were NOT mentioned in the Cyrus Cylinder, but it is a consistent policy that we find in Ezra 1 Notice that Cyrus acknowledged the "**God who is in Jerusalem**" (1:3), as a local deity, not the ruler of the world.

Why is this so important? 1) The Bible is not a history book, but it is the Word ground in history. It is not fairy tale, tall tale, or tales of epics or legend. It tells us exactly what happened has God intended it too, with God ruling over it all. 2) That even when God is not working miraculously like He did with Pharaoh in Egypt (remember the plagues), He is no less in control. These dates are not whimsical, but help us understand specifically when these things took place.

### **In the Activity of Rulers**

**Daniel 2:21** He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding;

**Romans 13:1** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Cyrus made a declaration that was beneficial for God's people, that was done with the acknowledgement of God, and accomplished what the Jews had hoped for. The question is this: *why did Cyrus make this declaration?* We've already looked at the fact that there was political expediency in the act, showing "progressive" thought on conquered people. But verse one gives us a clearer answer: *God stirred His spirit.* In other words, God did not give him a sign in the sky or write on a wall, but moved in this man's heart/mind to have him make this declaration.

Why is this so important? 1) When God initiates and sets forth the action, He gets the glory and credit. Cyrus was an instrument in God's hands, one that He allowed to rule so that He could make this type of declaration bringing the people of Israel back. 2) God is in control of all governing authorities, even those who are selfish, barbaric, or just plain idiotic (you can fill in the historical blank of world leaders in your memory bank). Even when it seems that injustice reigns, or we ask "how can this guy be the

---

<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, Ezra-Nehemiah, Tyndale OT Commentaries, p. 17.

leader?", we remember that God raises us and tears down, and accomplishes His will in ways we cannot see nor comprehend at the time. Why did Cyrus come to power? So that God would be glorified through him by making this declaration.

### **In the Heats of Mankind**

**John 14:16** And I will ask the Father, and he will give **you another Helper**, to be with you forever,<sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, **because it neither sees him nor knows him**. You know him, **for he dwells with you and will be in you**.

But God is not simply stirring up authorities and leaders, He stirs up those that He calls. He stirred up some of the people to come back to Jerusalem, so that they could accomplish what He had for them. Let's stop for a moment and consider the exiles.

It's difficult to read something like this and understand the immensity without understanding the situation. The people who had been carried off into exile had now been in the land of Babylon for **50 years**, some even more than that. That means that some who would come back would have only heard stories but had never actually experienced it. They had new lives in Babylon, and it was not as bad as it could have been. They could maintain their institutions like elders and prophets, had freedom of movement, employment opportunities (like Daniel and Mordecai), and fertile land in which to live.<sup>2</sup> But it would be equivalent to me taking my family back to New Vinip in the Netherlands, a place that my grandma grew up but where I have NO experiential knowledge. Not only were they going to an unknown place, but they were going to a burned out, poor, depleted, and depressed place. It was going to be costly for anyone going back. Even those who had been young when they left would not have recognized the place they were going.

Why is this important? 1) We must remember that we are to plan out our life, but God is the One who directs our steps (Prov. 16:9). God's leading does NOT mean we do not plan or move, as the people had to make a decision to actually move their families. God's stirring does not mean we are off the hook of risking. 2) God stirs our heart today through the Spirit, the One who indwells each believer, guiding us in the truth, and convicting unbelievers to repent. 1 Thessalonians 5:19 exhorts us not to **quench the Spirit**, which means that we can be disobedient to God's leading. Sometimes we miss opportunities because we refuse to yield to the leading of the Spirit because we continue to walk in the flesh.

### **In the Mystery of Sovereignty**

**Acts 2:23-24** this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.<sup>24</sup> God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Now, this elicits some questions as to God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Since God's sovereignty does not nullify our responsibility, this creates some tension in life. We can ask the question: **who put Jesus on the cross?** The answer: God through the Romans via the Jewish leadership. **How are we saved?** The answer: we respond by faith because of the grace God gave us. But this is not a 50/50

<sup>2</sup> Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, pp328-29.

proposition because God does not share His glory or credit for what He accomplishes. He initiates, we respond. This does not diminish the need of our response, but never puts us on the same level as God in the process.

### Takeaway: We can trust Him

**Psalm 127:1** Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

Why is this so important: We must understand both of these truths. Most times we diminish His place and put too much on ours. When we are facing uncertainty, trial, or suffering, we often want to take action in our own hands. God's sovereignty means we must be active in both **trust and obey, both resting and moving, both waiting and stepping out in faith.** God's sovereignty means that when we are waiting, He is active. When we don't know what the next step is, He absolutely does. This means we have clear purpose and hope in the midst of waiting.

### Gracious Providence Explains Small Does Not Mean Insignificant

**Ezra 2:64** The whole assembly together was 42,360,<sup>65</sup> besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers.

### Second Exodus

The people in exile were not simply allowed to return, they were equipped to return with gold basins, silver bowls, and other treasures from the former Temple. Much like the first Exodus under Moses, freedom was granted along with gifts from former captors. The Babylonian treasury released relics of a former glory to return, and fellow Jews along with others gave freewill offerings to help the relocation effort. Remember, this was going to be a 1000 mile journey without the prospect of having homes to go to, a Temple to worship in, or a strong group of people to return to. All of these provisions made the return possible, but not easy.

### Small Band

**1 Corinthians 1:26-31** For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.<sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;<sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.<sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Unlike the first Exodus where hundreds of thousands left, this was a comparatively sparse and seemingly insignificant group. In fact, to undertake this massive plan, less people than would fit in Dodger stadium were moved to return. Less than 50,000 total, which sounds like a lot if not for the fact that they had to rebuild a Temple, build their own homes, and get industry going again.

Why is this important? 1) God does not work in the same economy we do. We love the big, the massive, the expansive. God was going to accomplish this most pivotal and historical undertaking NOT with overwhelming numbers, nor an impressive collection of talent, He was going to do it with a group that had no business accomplishing this much. This is not the first nor the last time He's done this. Gideon was to whittle down his forces against the Midianites (Judges 6) so that all would know God gave

the victory. Even the church today is not built on the mighty or strong, but on the weak and foolish so that He gets all the glory for accomplishing something so great.

### **Takeaway: We don't labor in vain**

**1 Corinthians 15:58** Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

I am amazed by the people of this church sometimes (ok, all the time). We have some who take care of loved ones, parents, spouses who no longer function normally, and still manage to work and manage their homes. I talked to a dear friend here a few weeks ago and she relayed her normal routine of life. Get up, take care of her husband who cannot take care of himself on his own, go to work, come home and take care of her father who cannot himself, go to bed late at night, and do it all again the next day. No complaint. No change. No great hope that it will be over soon. This is labor, but it is not in vain. There is no great work being accomplished, other than faithful service. God works in the seemingly insignificant to accomplish His will, all to His glory. So we do not lose heart.

### **Gracious Providence Requires Lining Up Our Priorities with His**

The narrative does not advance much more than this over the first two chapters, but there are two things that stand out in the lists of people and resources that returned. The first is that there were a large number of priests and Levites who returned in comparison with the whole (see 2:36-42). About 10% of all the people returning would work in the Temple. The second is the fact that **freewill offerings** were given to those who would return, according to their own ability (2:69). This gives us insight into God's desire for us and similar things we are called to in the NT:

#### **Priority of Worship**

**John 4:21-24** Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

THE priority of the returnees was to get the Temple built and to reestablish worship. Now, it is true that worship does not happen merely in one place, as Jesus taught the Samaritan woman at the well. We worship God everyday, especially now that we have the Spirit and Christ fulfilled and obliterated the need for the existing Temple. However, it does remind us of the importance God places on corporate worship:

*"Religious traditions and "institutionalization" may sometimes become obstacles to true faith if they become the objects of faith, but they are also necessary to the survival of faith and faithfulness to God's Word."<sup>3</sup>*

Though true worship can easily be replaced by heartless tradition learned by rote, God always places high value on His people gathering together to worship Him above all things. This means that He has top billing, number one priority in our lives. We are not trying to fit Him into our schedules, but prioritizing everything else around our worship of Him.

#### **Priority of Free Will Giving**

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Breneman, The New American Commentary, p. 71.

**2 Corinthians 8:1-5** We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints- <sup>5</sup> and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Notice that the giving was not prescribed or commanded in terms of amount. In the Law and when the people were in the land, God or the king would command how much was to be given, but now the people were to decide how much they **could** give, not how much they had to give. This is the same economy we find ourselves in. God has called us to give to His work, to allow money to be both a stewardship and blessing, and to give generously. We do not give out of what is left over, but as first priority. We seek ways to give of ourselves and our resources as our greatest value, not as a possible place for our leftovers. This takes planning, consideration, and deep commitment. We are in a similar situation as the Jewish people: are we going to stay comfortable or risk? Are we going to give out of leftovers or of firstfruits? Are we going to fit God into our schedules or does He rule ours?

#### Questions to Consider:

- How would you answer the question of God's power and bad things happening in the world? Does your answer bring comfort? Does it try to make excuses for God?
- How does life function when we understand how God's sovereignty and our responsibility work together? What happens to our mind when we lean too far on the sovereignty side and discount our responsibility? What happens when we lean too far on our own responsibility?
- How do we make decisions according to God's leading through the Spirit? Is this the same thing as "follow your heart"? How do we quantify if God is leading us or our own desires?
- What seemingly insignificant things are you involved in? How is God teaching you, showing His glory, and accomplishing His will in these things?
- Are worship and giving two of your top priorities? Why or why not?