

REBUILDING AFTER RUIN - part 1

Anyone you know taking on a building project? Lots of planning, decisions, organizing resources and people, dealing with problems, staying at it. Lots of steps and challenges. But it's an even greater challenge when you're starting with rubble. That's what God's people faced in the book of Ezra. It's a lot like building your Christian life, and building God's kingdom by making disciples of Jesus.

The book of Ezra opens with a notable narrative. In his first year as King of Persia, in order to fulfill God's word through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up King Cyrus to make a proclamation in writing, to all of his kingdom. Cyrus ruled Persia from 550-530BC, expanding into an immense empire, conquering Babylon in 539BC and inheriting the Israelite exiles there. This had been predicted 160 years earlier. Isaiah 45 refers to the future Cyrus as anointed by the Lord to subdue nations for the sake of Israel: *"I call you by name though you do not know Me, I equip you, that people may know I am the Lord and there is no other; he shall build My city and set My exiles free,"* says the Lord of Hosts.

1- GOD RAISES UP PEOPLE - *to do His will, by His divine decree.* God's purpose drives history. God names Cyrus generations before, and His prophets foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah 25 points to the 70 years of captivity, and Jeremiah 29 their return to the homeland. The royal decree of King Cyrus is really a divine decree of Almighty God, who rules over all people and all things. As Proverbs 21:1 says, *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, he turns it wherever He will."*

Many have noted similarities between King Cyrus and President Trump, as men of unusual abilities raised up by God for His purposes. Trump has professed personal faith in Jesus Christ. But Cyrus was a polytheistic pagan who particularly worshiped the snake-dragon Marduk. In Isaiah 45:5 the Lord declares, *"there is no God beside Me."* The gods and idols of the ancient world were man-made representations of demons, and some researchers indicate that prominent powers-that-be around the world still worship them. In Arkansas last year, a Satanic temple group erected a statue of Baphomet, a winged goat-head depiction of a demonic spiritual entity, as a protest against a monument to the Ten Commandments.

2- GOD PROVIDES THE FUNDS - The royal records of Cyrus show that he appeased all so-called gods of conquered peoples, in order to stabilize his own reign. But he used proper terms for *"the Lord, the God of Israel, God in Jerusalem"* and Cyrus ordered that those who worship God should go to Jerusalem, rebuild the holy house, and that citizens should assist with silver, gold, beasts, and freewill offerings.

This giving of money to the returning remnant to Israel echoes Exodus 12 and Israel taking the riches of Egypt for the journey to the Promised Land. Haggai 2:8 explains, *"the treasures of the nations will come in, and I will fill this house with glory. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of Hosts."* God owns all things and He distributes them for His own divine purposes.

Derek Kidner notes, "the fall of Jerusalem was a death to make way for a rebirth. A millennium before this, Israel had been transplanted to Egypt, to emerge no longer a family but a nation. Now her long night in Babylon was to mark another turningpoint, so that she emerged no longer a kingdom but a little flock with the makings of a church." (And God had predicted it all, such as Deuteronomy 26:5).

3- GOD'S PRIORITY OF WORSHIP - *in obedience to His Word.* Some 10,000 exiles to Babylon obeyed God's call for them to prosper where He planted them, to seek the welfare of the place God sent them, because of His plans for their future and hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Some 40,000 returned to Israel in the first wave, as Ezra 2 lists those who went to re-establish the altar, the temple, true worship of the one true God of heaven and earth, per Isaiah 10:20-22. This God we can trust with our own futures.

Amidst this returning remnant, God had raised up Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel, grandson of King Jehoiachin of Israel, as two co-leaders with the common purpose of restoring the proper worship of God. Along with them were pilgrims, priests, Levites, temple servants, etc. Kidner calls them "living portions of Israel, roots and all, for replanting in Jerusalem." Ezra 3 says they *"gathered as one man to Jerusalem."*

First, they built the altar of God, to offer burnt offerings *according to the law of Moses the man of God,* for the Feast of Tabernacles. They quickly set up homes to live in, then set about establishing the greater house of God. This unity in purpose and devotion to God recalls the primary vocation of all believers.

4- GOD'S PURPOSE IN WORSHIP - As 1 Peter 2:5 says, *"you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* This echoes God's words to Moses in Exodus 19:6. And in Exodus 29:43 God promised to *"meet with"* His people in the tabernacle, the transportable worship tent in the wilderness, who were on their way to the land promised to Abram in Genesis 12, and where he had built an altar to the Lord.

Kidner notes that 1,500 years before Ezra, "Abram set up his altar as a bold Amen to the promise. But these settlers were moved as much by fear as by faith, for access to God which was promised at the altar." Today, children of the King of the universe must attend to the King's business. Worship is not an option for believers, but the command of the King who gives us spiritual life. Believers in Christ make worship a priority, not just Sunday but every day, in every aspect of life - lived for Him who saves us! ☐