

God can be trusted to do as He promises

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, perhaps you'd turn with me to the first chapter of the book of Ezra, and you'll find this on page 389 in our hardback Bibles, the book of Ezra, chapter 1.

I really wanted to read the whole of chapters 1 and 2.

I'm not going to, but if you glance at chapter 2, I think you'll see the reason why. I was practicing it at home. It's full of names and lists of numbers and so on, and I thought, if I read the whole of this, that the congregation is going to be comatose before I get through.

So I decided not to do that. I'm rather loathe to leave out some parts of chapter 2, because the Lord, after all, has honored all these people whose names are listed here.

He's honored them by including their names in Scripture. They were brave Jewish people who had the courage, after the exile was over, to face the journey of 600 or 700 miles across an inhospitable desert to get back to Jerusalem.

[1 : 13] So you might like, at some later stage, to look over these names at home and to thank God for them. So I'll read the whole of chapter 1, and then I'll give a very much abbreviated version of chapter 2.

So we're beginning tonight a new series of studies in the book of Ezra. 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 the kingdom, and also put it in writing.

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.

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. 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.

[2 : 33] 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.

And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver and gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus, the king, also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

Cyrus, king of Persia, brought these out in charge of Mithradath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Shesh-bazar, the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them.

Thirty basins of gold, one thousand basins of silver, twenty-nine censers, thirty bowls of gold, four hundred and ten bowls of silver, and one thousand other vessels.

All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand four hundred. All these did Shesh-bazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

[3 : 46] Now as we turn to chapter two, let's notice the different categories of people who are mentioned here. We have the list of men of Israel starting in verse two. We have the priests mentioned in verses thirty-six to thirty-nine.

Then the Levites in verse forty. The singers in verse forty-one. The gatekeepers in verse forty-two. Then we have temple servants in verse forty-three.

The sons of Solomon's servants in verse fifty-five. And then a group of people who are described as people who couldn't prove their authentic descent from the Jewish stock.

They went to Jerusalem. They thought they were Jews, but they couldn't prove it. So here we have our abridged version of chapter two. I'll start at verse one. Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had carried captive to Babylonia.

They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah. That's not the Nehemiah who rebuilt the walls.

[4 : 54] It's an earlier one. Nehemiah, Seriah, Realiab, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mizpah, Bigvi, Rehum, and Baana. Now we'll turn on to verse sixty-four.

We've been through all this list of people. The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven.

And they had two hundred male and female singers. Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules were two hundred and forty-five, their camels were four hundred and thirty-five, and their donkeys were six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.

According to their ability, they gave to the treasury of the work sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priests' garments. Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants, lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.

[6 : 10] This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord add his blessing to it this evening. You should have discovered a little historical guide on your seat.

We'll come to that in a moment, but I hope that will be helpful, because there's a bit of history involved this evening. So Ezra chapter one, let's turn that up again, page 389 in the big Bibles. My title for this evening is God can be trusted to do as he promises. When a political party has been in power for some time, perhaps for a year or two, we often hear it criticized rather like this. Somebody looks across the House of Commons and says, before the election, the party opposite promised that you were going to do this and that. You were going to sort out this problem and help us to achieve this.

But you have not delivered on your promise. How can we trust a party which is all promise and no performance? And we've often heard that kind of criticism, haven't we?

[7 : 24] The book of Ezra is about the God who performs what he promises. And we learn this from the very first verse. Look with me at verse one.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, accomplished, 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.

And in the proclamation, which is recorded in verses two, three, and four, Cyrus explains that the Lord has commanded him to get the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt.

Therefore, he says, let the Jews in the Persian Empire hasten back to Jerusalem and get this job done. So the author of the book of Ezra, who could well have been Ezra himself, tells us with great emphasis in his very first verse that this book is about God delivering on his promise.

The Lord is not like a politician who fails to deliver what he promises. The history records recorded in the book of Ezra is the history of the God who keeps his word and fulfills it.

[8 : 40] Now, friends, we'll get into the nuts and bolts of this history in just a moment. But first, let me say something about history itself, because it's a matter of real importance for Christians. Think of your family for a moment.

I guess all of us have bits and pieces of family history, perhaps interesting little bits and pieces. We have a sense of our family roots. Stories get handed down from one generation to another.

Just to give you one, nothing very special, this, but one from my own family. My great-grandfather made boots and shoes, and he was a bit of an entrepreneur in his own way, and he wanted to establish himself as a young shoemaker.

So as a young man, aged 20-something, he went to Australia in the days of the gold rush. This was 1850-odd. And when he was on the gold fields with his brother, they invented a special boot that had a hollow heel.

Now the idea was that the gold prospectors would find nuggets of gold, and they wanted to keep their nuggets of gold safe. So if they could take the heel off their boot, stick the nuggets in the heel, stick the heel back on the boot, and then go to bed in their boots and sleep in their boots, you had to do that, of course, then you could preserve your gold from would-be robbers.

[9 : 55] Now I guess all families have quirky little stories of that kind, don't they? And we feel closely attached to these family anecdotes. Somehow they're part of us, even if they took place a hundred or more years ago.

They give us a sense of who we are and where we came from. But we may feel that we have no such links with Old Testament history. Ezra.

Who was Ezra? Where did he live? And when? 450-something BC. How can we possibly feel connected with a man like that? And think of where he was.

He lived out in the Middle East. He wrote in Hebrew. He was a Jewish scholar and teacher. What could people like us possibly have in common with him? Well, what we have in common with Ezra is Abraham and everything that stems from Abraham and, of course, the God of Abraham.

When God called Abraham from his original home, he promised him three things. A land, the promised land, the land of Canaan, a family, a great nation to be descended from him, and thirdly, through that family, that God's blessing would spread out to the Gentile nations as well, ultimately, that they should be blessed with salvation through Christ.

[11 : 11] So as soon as people like us become Christians and join this family, we become part of Abraham's extended family. The God that we worship is the God who bound himself in covenant to Abraham.

You know how in one of our hymns we sing, Hail Abraham's God and Mine. Or is it ours? Hail Abraham's God and I forget which. Hail Abraham's God and Mine.

So the history recorded in the Bible is our family history. Now friends, if you're aware that your immediate neighbor is breathing rather deeply and is therefore probably asleep, just nudge him, or it could even be her, gently in the ribs and wake him or possibly her up because what I'm about to say now is really important.

And it's this. The more firmly we can grasp the history recorded in the Bible, the more deeply and fully we will appreciate and understand the gospel. It is perfectly possible to be a vigorous active servant of Christ with a minimal knowledge of Bible history.

But we will undoubtedly live the Christian life with much more joy and understanding if we can get to know the history recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Now the reason for this is that the gospel is a record of things that happened in history.

[12 : 33] The heart of the gospel message around Jesus is a series of historical facts. Jesus was born, fact. Jesus taught. Jesus died on the cross.

Jesus was raised from death as a matter of historical fact. Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus will come again. That hasn't happened yet but we look forward to it historically.

The gospel is the series of those historical facts plus of course the implications that flow from them. But without that history there is simply no gospel.

Now this is what makes Christianity unique and uniquely true. Other world faiths have no comparable history. They may record a few personal facts about the lives of the Buddha or the Guru Nanak of the Sikhs or Mohammed of Islam but the teaching of those faiths is all expressed in terms of moral injunction.

Live like this. Live like that. Do this. Do that. Don't do this. Don't do that. Behave according to the ancient codes. All other faiths say do.

[13 : 42] Only Christianity says done. All other faiths give good advice. Only Christianity gives good news. So our whole position as Christians our whole understanding of the gospel depends upon the fact that God has intervened historically and has secured our salvation through the achievements of Jesus.

But the history of the Old Testament greatly helps us to understand everything that God was doing in preparation for the coming of Jesus. The Old Testament you might say is the back story.

It shows us how God has directed history and what God has done. It opens up his character to us. We learn what he's like from Old Testament history. So we discover him calling a people to be his own special possession the people of Israel.

we discover how he distinguishes that people from all other peoples. We discover how graciously and kindly he deals with that people. How he protects them and guides them and keeps them. How he lovingly disciplines them and trains them and how he prepares them for the arrival of their ultimate king and savior Jesus. So yes we can be Christians and love the Lord Jesus without knowing much of that back story.

[14 : 59] But the more we know it the better we will know Jesus and the better we'll be able to articulate and defend the truth of the Bible. The history recorded in the Bible demonstrates the purposes of God the power of God and indeed the very existence of God.

In a sense learning the history in the Old Testament is a little bit like learning a new language which I think can be rather difficult. Progress can be slow and patchy.

I think back to my own learning of French in school. J'ai faim F-A-I-M That means I'm hungry I have hunger J'ai faim Donnez-moi Give me S'il vous plaît Please Donnez-moi S'il vous plaît Un bar de chocolat Now that's beginner's French That's the sort of thing I started with but you persevere and you start to make much better progress.

That's just the same with Old Testament history But once we grasp that Old Testament history is tracing the loving acts of God as he prepares the human race for the coming of his wonderful son the whole thing becomes much more interesting.

Now let's turn then to this first verse of the book of Ezra because it's a historical verse 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.

[16 : 37] Now this verse as I hinted earlier sets up the theme of the whole book of Ezra and it's the theme of my sermon this evening. If God has said it God will do it.

Whatever God promises he will perform. But notice this about verse 1 it is not primarily about Cyrus who is mentioned twice.

It's not primarily about the prophet Jeremiah mentioned once a great prophet it's about the Lord. The Lord you see is the subject of the main verb and it's the Lord who initiates all the action that takes place.

The first phrase of the verse gives the timing the historical marker in the first year of Cyrus which was 539 BC. The second phrase of the verse shows the intention that the word of the Lord through Jeremiah might be fulfilled.

And then we have the center of the verse the business end of the verse the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus so that he made a proclamation. Now it's so easy to miss it and to misread it.

[17 : 44] We tend to home in on Cyrus and Jeremiah who certainly have a part to play in working out God's sovereign purpose. But the instigator, the initiator, the actor, the doer is God himself.

The author is telling us in no uncertain terms at the very start of his book that this book records the historical deeds of the God of Israel. And incidentally this is the way to read all the historical books of the Old Testament correctly.

They are all about what God is doing. Our instinct is always to read them the wrong way round and to ask what are these people, these interesting people doing?

We're desperate to want to know and evaluate these kings and military leaders and prophets. We're by nature addicted to man-centeredness. But these books are about what God is doing.

It's exactly the same in verse five if you look on down to that. then rose up the heads of the father's 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.

[18 : 52] Now our instinct is to say, well done, you leaders of Judah and Benjamin. Bravo, you priests and Levites. But when you read the verse carefully, it's clear that these people only set out for Jerusalem to rebuild the temple because God had stirred their spirits to get up and go.

This book is about the doings of God before it's about the doings of men. Well, let's dive into the history and get our bearings. And perhaps at this stage I can ask you to look at, if you haven't turned this into a paper dart already, perhaps you'll pick up this piece of paper and look at the historical outline.

Now the first half of the paper, the first half of it roughly, deals with fairly familiar territory, or at least more familiar territory, from the death of Moses, about 1400 BC, through the time of the judges, then into the monarchy, the reigns of Saul and David and Solomon.

Then we have the division of the kingdom, just after Solomon's death, into Israel and Judah, right down to 587 BC, when Jerusalem was sacked, the temple was burned and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army, and many Jews were taken away to Babylon, into exile. By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion. Now to put it mildly, the exile, the beginning of the exile was a very low point in Israel's history, because the people asked, has God forgotten the covenant?

[20 : 28] Has the covenant come to an end? Has he torn up the covenant with Israel and binned it? The book of Ezra shows that, indeed, he had not.

Now perhaps you'd keep your eye on the lower section of my outline, and that's the part about the kings of the Persian empire. Cyrus had ascended the throne of the Persian empire in 549 BC, but it was ten years later, in 539, that he conquered the Babylonian empire, which included, on its western fringes, Israel and Judah.

So it was from 539 onwards that the promised land was transferred from Babylonian rule to Persian rule. And Ezra tells us in his first verse that it was in the first year of Cyrus, meaning 539, that's the first year after he conquered Babylon, that he made his proclamation, allowing the Jews, well, commanding the Jews, to return to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Now, you may have spotted at the bottom of my outline that Ezra didn't come to Jerusalem until the year 458 BC, when another king, Artaxerxes, was on the throne.

So there's a gap of about 80 years between Cyrus' proclamation, 539, and Ezra's journey to Jerusalem in 458. So you might say the plot thickens.

[21 : 50] How do we work out this history? But the mystery is quite easily resolved, the history mystery. If you turn on to Ezra chapter 7, verse 1, this will give us a pretty firm clue.

Chapter 7, verse 1. Now, after this, what he means is a considerable time after this.

In the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Sarai, etc., etc., we get a long genealogy of Ezra, right down to Aaron, the chief priest, at the end of verse 5.

This Ezra, showing that he's a bona fide member of the priestly clan, this Ezra went up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. Now, this means that the book of Ezra falls into two parts.

We have chapters 1 to 6 and chapters 7 to 10. And Ezra himself doesn't appear until we get to chapter 7. Now, as I said earlier, it's very likely that Ezra himself is the author of the whole book.

[22 : 55] So what he's done is to give us in the first part, chapters 1 to 6, the history of that earlier period from 539 B.C. through to 515 B.C., a period of 24 years, which begins with the first group of Jews setting out to Jerusalem and ends with the completion of the rebuilding of the temple in 515 B.C.

And then chapters 7 to 10 deal with a much later period, Ezra's own lifetime. So nearly 60 years pass between the completion of the new temple in 515 and Ezra's journey to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. And the second half of the book is all about Ezra's own role and work. And his work was to teach the law of the Lord, the law of Moses, to the people. So the first part of the book, chapters 1 to 6, is about the reestablishment of the temple at the heart of Jerusalem.

And the second part of the book, chapters 7 to 10, is about the reestablishment of the law of the Lord, the teaching of Moses at the heart of the people. So in shorthand, chapters 1 to 6, the temple, chapters 7 to 10, the teaching.

Now we'll get into the details of chapters 1 and 2 in a moment. But before we do, I want to pause and suggest how a book like this is most helpful to the Lord's people in the 21st century A.D.

[24 : 23] The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the exile to Babylon was the most crushing blow to the people of God. But the books of Ezra and the next book, Nehemiah, which actually form one scroll in the original Hebrew scriptures, they're considered to be one book.

These two books tell of the way that God will never forsake his people and will enable them, even after something like the exile, to begin again. So they're telling us what God was like then and, of course, what God is still like today.

And we're intended to notice certain patterns that emerge in the Bible. And here we have one of them. Because this return from captivity in Babylon is rather like a second exodus.

In the original exodus, back in 14 something, 1400 B.C., God brought his people out of their slavery in Egypt. He brought them through the wilderness. It was not a straightforward process.

There was a great deal of godlessness and rebellion. But the people were finally brought to the freedom of their own land, the promised land of Canaan. But now, some eight or nine hundred

years later, they again find themselves in slavery as a subjugated people.

[25 : 42] And again, the Lord brings them out across the desert and reestablishes them in their land. Now, by this stage, of course, their land was no longer an independent nation state.

It was now part of the great Persian Empire. But they were allowed to return to Israel. They were allowed to reestablish the temple and the teaching and the observance of the law of Moses, which was their Bible.

Then think of this pattern emerging again. Come forward 500 years or so later, and we have the greatest of all liberations achieved by Jesus.

His exodus was his death and resurrection, by which he broke the ultimate slavery, which is the slavery to the power of death and hell. And all who belong to Jesus are on our way to the ultimate promised land, which is the new creation.

So that's the pattern from slavery to freedom. Then it was geographical. Now it's eternal for us, but it's done by the power of God and the grace of God. So, friends, let's prepare to be greatly encouraged by the events recorded in the book of Ezra, because they show us how God patiently and lovingly does his work, never abandoning his people, not even in a catastrophe like the exile, and never abandoning his covenant.

[27 : 04] And this message of the book of Ezra will give us fresh heart today, because we today are battling through the wilderness of this modern world with all its hatreds and horrors, not least its hatreds of the Lord Jesus and of the gospel.

Think of the state of the church in modern Britain. There are many bright spots in it. There are fine churches up and down the country. There are fine parachurch organizations like the UCCF, which give us much to be thankful for.

But also we know there is much in the churches that is depressing, especially in the older denominations. And if you listen a lot to the secular media, you'd think that Christianity in Britain is now like the dodo, last seen in the 19th century and never coming back.

But the book of Ezra, a book about God and his word and his promises, shows us what God is really like, how he does not abandon his people, but is surely at work to bring all his purposes to fruition and to deliver on all his promises.

Well, now in the last part of my talk tonight, I want to focus on the two great stirrings, the two great stirrings of Ezra chapter one. So let's turn back to chapter one.

[28 : 21] The first stirring is there in verse one. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and, to make assurance doubly sure, he put it in writing.

Now what is the heart of this proclamation? It's the command in verse two to rebuild the temple, the house of God, in Jerusalem. Now friends, this is a really extraordinary episode.

We might read this rather quickly and think, well, here's the Emperor Cyrus making a proclamation. Isn't that the way that emperors carried on? An emperor in those days would get up in the morning and read the newspapers.

He would issue a proclamation here and there, have a Turkish bath, have a good lunch and an afternoon nap, and finish his day. Well, no doubt the emperors did issue proclamations from time to time, but they did not issue this kind of proclamation.

What Cyrus is commanding here is a complete reversal of what Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had done 50 years before. Nebuchadnezzar's policy was to smash Jerusalem to pieces and to bring the surviving Jews out of Jerusalem to Babylon.

[29 : 38] His plan was to use the most able of the young Jews, like Daniel and his friends, to run the empire more efficiently. Daniel became a very senior administrator. Cyrus, however, developed a completely opposite policy.

Send the subjugated peoples back to their homelands and get them to reestablish their communities and their religious practices. There was a bit of self-interest here.

Cyrus would have said, and then they'll pray for me, and they'll pray then for the success of my rule because they'll be happier to be back in their own countries. It seems that Cyrus wanted to honor the gods of all the different nations in the Persian Empire.

He wanted, if you like, to have all the gods and deities and godlets on his side. I suppose that's a little bit like government policy in modern Britain, isn't it? Let's nominally put Christianity first because of our history.

We're a Christian country, but let's make sure that all the faiths are on our side. Let's be the defenders of faith, not the defenders of the faith. So, on one level, Cyrus was wanting to strengthen the ties between himself and the far-flung corners of his empire.

[30 : 47] It was a carefully calculated policy to strengthen the empire. Well, that was what was going on politically and strategically in Cyrus' mind.

But on another level, and much more important, it was God who was at work. And in particular, God was at work to deliver on the promise that he'd made to his people through the prophet Jeremiah, who'd been preaching in Jerusalem in the years before and after 600 BC and right up to the beginning of the exile.

So, what had Jeremiah said which Ezra sees as the Lord now fulfilling? No need to turn it up, but let me quote from Jeremiah chapter 29.

Thus says the Lord, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise to bring you back to this place, meaning Jerusalem.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. And then he says a few verses later, I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

[32 : 02] Now, Jeremiah had said that before the exile had even begun. So, to fulfill the Jeremiah promise made some 60 or 70 years earlier, the Lord stirs up the spirit of this pagan dictator, Cyrus.

To Cyrus, it's a matter of astute political thinking and strategy, wise government. But to Ezra, it's a demonstration of God's unshakable commitment to do as he has promised.

Now, Jeremiah was prophesying in about 600 BC. But let me now read you a passage from Isaiah, who was prophesying in about 700 BC, a hundred years before Jeremiah.

This is what Isaiah says in his 44th chapter. I am the Lord who says to the deep, be dry. I will dry up your rivers. Who says to Cyrus, he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill my purpose.

Saying of Jerusalem, she shall be built and of the temple, your foundation shall be laid. And then Isaiah goes on in his next chapter, chapter 45.

[33 : 15] Thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him. For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel, whom I have chosen, I call you, Cyrus, by your name.

I name you, though you do not know me. Isn't that remarkable? There's Isaiah in about 700 BC, looking forward to 539 BC and speaking by name of Cyrus and Cyrus as the shepherd of Israel, even though he doesn't know the Lord God of Israel.

He's a pagan king, but he's also an instrument in the hand of God to reestablish the people of Israel after their punishment and exile. Isn't it comforting to us to know that pagan governments and rulers, well, all the rulers of the earth, are directed ultimately by God.

Our God determines the history of the world as well as the history of the church. So there's the first stirring. Cyrus, this pagan despot, is stirred by God to issue his proclamation that the temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt.

There's a stirring in my throat. I'm going to stir it up with this fine water. Well, let's look at the second stirring in verse 5. Then rose up the heads of the father's 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.

[34 : 50] So God stirred their spirits and they rose up. He did the stirring and they responded by rising up and doing. Now that's the way the Lord always works, isn't it?

He does the stirring and we respond by rising up from our characteristic attitudes of slothfulness and sluggishness and rolling up our sleeves. Now let's look at verse 5 a little bit more carefully. Who is being stirred up by the Lord? Well, there are three categories of people mentioned. The family heads of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, then the priests and then the Levites.

And we might ask, why just Judah and Benjamin? What about the other ten tribes? Manasseh and Ephraim and Reuben and Gad and Asher and all the others. Well, those other tribes had been more or less obliterated in 722 BC when the Assyrians arrived and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.

Those ten tribes, those that hadn't been killed, had been carted off to the far regions of the Assyrian Empire and that was more or less the end of them. They were not heard of again. The southern kingdom of Judah consisted only of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

[36 : 04] And it was those tribes who were exiled to Babylon. Clearly some priests and Levites had also been taken to Babylon. And if you look across at the lists of the returnees in chapter 2, you'll see the priests are listed there in verse 36, the Levites in verse 40, and so on.

So what were these folk stirred up by the Lord to do? Well, there's only one thing, and it's emphasized very strongly. That's what the rest of chapter 1 and chapter 2 are all about. They are stirred to go and rebuild the temple. Yes, later on, the whole of the city and the walls had to be rebuilt. That's what Nehemiah was sent to do nearly a century later. But the first thing, the thing of first priority in God's order of priorities, was to rebuild the temple. Look at the repetitions. Verse 2, He has charged me to build him a house, says Cyrus. Verse 3, Go up to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord. Verse 4, Take silver and gold and much else besides for the house of God.

[37 : 13] Verse 5, To go up and rebuild the house of the Lord. So why this urgent necessity to rebuild the temple? The answer is because the temple was the central demonstration of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

It symbolized God dwelling there amongst his people. Now, they knew perfectly well that he wasn't localized or boxed up within the temple, within a building.

They knew that he was above and beyond the very universe. But the temple symbolized his loving presence amongst them. And in the temple, there were two ultimately important things. First of all, the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments. And that spoke of God's loving rule of Israel by his word. And the second important thing was the altar, the altar of sacrifice, where the shed blood of animals assured the Israelites that their sins were atoned for.

So the temple was a constant, visible, and tangible assurance of God's relationship with his people. It spoke of his presence with them, his gracious ruling of them by his word, and his gracious forgiveness of their sins by the blood shed in sacrifice.

[38 : 34] Those three things. Presence, word, forgiveness. Now, isn't that the gospel? Doesn't that describe Jesus?

Presence. Emmanuel. God with us. Word. He is the word. He went up on the mountain and sat down and taught his disciples.

And forgiveness. It is finished. The cross. The blood shed in a sacrifice that never has to be repeated. In fact, Jesus describes himself as the temple in John's gospel.

He's the new temple that supersedes the old temple in Jerusalem and renders it obsolete. And the apostle Paul draws this teaching out yet further when he says to the Corinthian Christians, you are God's temple.

So the temple today is the living and breathing people of God. We who are Christians are God's temple. Again, these three things. Presence. He lives within us.

[39 : 40] In the person of the Holy Spirit. Word. His word is our rule. It's our delight and our joy. And as we submit to it, it increasingly reconstructs our very thinking.

And forgiveness. We are the people whose sins have been atoned for once and for all by the shed blood of Christ. So Ezra has a powerful point to make to us today.

The building of the temple today, which is the building up of the people of God, that is the priority. In those days, they had to get the temple started up. It's our priority too.

We might even think of it in this country as the rebuilding of the temple in today's secular Britain. I only half heard the news at lunchtime today, but I think there was some report about Scotland, wasn't there?

That there's been a survey carried out in the last few weeks, which indicates that fewer than 50% of those in Scotland now consider they have any kind of religious faith. We have a big task on our hands if that's true.

[40 : 40] But it's a glorious aim for all of us who belong to Christ to share in. Again, the work of the Lord's people today is to strengthen, to build, to extend and enlarge the temple done under the grace of God and by his power.

It's what we're here for. Now, I know we have other things to do in life as well. Good things.

God-given things. We have to raise families if we have families. We have to do our work in offices and hospitals and schools and building sites.

We have to put bread on the table. And the Lord gives us these good things to do. But for us as a people of God, our great aim is to build the temple, to proclaim and press home the eternal gospel, and lovingly to bring more and more people to hear it and to understand it.

Ezra knew this. And from chapter 1, verse 6, to the end of chapter 2, it's all about the restocking and the re-equipping of the temple with the necessary bowls and basins and censers, with priests, Levites, who were assistants to the priests, with singers, nothing like a congregation in good voice, gatekeepers, temple servants, and so on.

Lots of people doing lots of different things, but all serving the one great cause, which is the temple. And Ezra sums it up in the final verse of chapter 2.

[42 : 01] Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns, ready to start this work.

And all this happened, chapter 1, verse 1, because the word of the Lord, by the mouth of Jeremiah, had to be fulfilled. So let's not doubt God.

Let's not worry that he will default on a single promise that he has made. It's something to rejoice in for all of us, isn't it? Has Jesus promised about the church, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it?

He has indeed. And if the gates of hell have no power against the church, what hope has modern secularism of defeating it? And think of this on the personal level.

Has Jesus promised to every Christian that everyone who looks on the Son of God and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day? That's what he has promised.

[43 : 09] He will keep his word. He will do it. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for stirring up your people back in those days when they had been so broken and so discouraged, so traumatized by the exile.

And yet as time came and went, you stirred up this pagan king and a doorway was opened for them to return and to rebuild the temple in the heart of Jerusalem.

We thank you so much. And we thank you for giving us this same task ourselves. We freely confess to you, dear Father, that we feel frail in the face of it. But we thank you so much for your promises, all the gospel promises, all the promises of the Bible.

And we pray indeed that you'll give us this joy of seeing them fulfilled one after the other, until finally we see your face in the heavenly places and fall down in worship and joy before you in all your glory.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.