

# The God Who Keeps His Word and Stirs Hearts

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now. Paul Brennan, one of our ministers, is going to be preaching God's Word to us shortly, and he's beginning a new series this evening in the book of Ezra.

So do grab a Bible and read along. If you don't have one, we do have plenty of visitors' Bibles around the auditorium. If you wave your hand, I'm sure someone in the welcome team would love to find one for you. Or if you're sitting beside someone who you don't recognize and you're a regular, you could go and fetch one for someone who's beside you.

But we're going to read together from Ezra chapter 1. If you are using one of the visitors' Bibles, that's page 389.

The whole of Ezra chapter 1, beginning at verse 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.

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.

[ 1 : 2 4 ] 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.

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, with 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 the charge of Mithridath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Shesh-bazar, the prince of Judah.

[ 2 : 3 4 ] 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.

Amen. This is God's word. Give. Now this will not be a surprise to you, but the church is not front page news.

Unless, of course, it's for bad reasons. The church is not the subject of best-selling books. It is not the subject of blockbuster movies in the cinema. The church seems like a spent force, at least according to our media.

The national church here in Scotland, or across the UK and the Western world, is in decline. In free fall, really, churches closing all over the place, not enough ministers.

[ 3 : 47 ] The days of Billy Graham coming in the 50s, with millions across the nation flocking to hear him sing like a long time ago. The church of Jesus Christ seems like something of a loser.

Don't you think? And who cares about losers? The church is the St. Mirren of the Scottish football scene. Who cares? Don't know.

I'm sorry. I don't know if there's any St. Mirren fans, but don't take that too personally. I'm a Man U fan, so that's the definition of spent forces and losers. But who cares about the church today?

Well, the book of Ezra takes us back a long time ago, to around 440 BC. The mega power of the day was the mighty Persian Empire.

A massive empire stretching across most of the known world. Vast, powerful, very impressive. And in the days of Ezra and also its companion Nehemiah, who cares about the spent force of God's people, Israel?

[ 5 : 00 ] They're nothing. Who cares about some political backwater nation in the ancient Near East? They've been in exile for 70 years by this point. They were irrelevant, losers.

Who cares? Well, Ezra chapter 1, verse 1, tells us who cares. And God cares. The covenant God cares.

The God who created the heavens and the earth cares for this bunch of losers. Look again at verse 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.

God cares because he has made promises to these apparent losers. And for this reason, he moves history on their behalf.

God moves history to give his people hope and a future. Our key focus this evening is on one major point, and it's this.

[ 6 : 17 ] There is one key factor in human history in the onward march of Christ's church across the world and even here in this city, in our own lives, and that key factor is God himself and his unbreakable word of promise.

It is his word that determines history. It is his word that is directing all things, all things for his purposes and for the fulfillment of his promises to his people, even to you and me.

So here's our key point for this evening as we begin our studies in Ezra. This is the one thing we must grasp and know and cherish.

God's word of promise directs history. That is the one thing you've got to grasp hold of. God's word of promise directs everything.

It directs history. It is God's word that is central in this chapter. It's not Cyrus, who was the king of this great empire. The main thing is not his edict.

[ 7 : 28 ] Not that those are unimportant, but Cyrus is not the one who is in charge here. Cyrus is not the key player. The initiative does not rest with Cyrus, does it? Rather, it's God who directs and who initiates things here.

Cyrus is almost incidental to God's plans and purposes. It is the Lord who stirs him to act so that, and here's the key, so that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.

That is why God moves this great, powerful emperor. It's so that his promises would come to be. He could shift an entire empire for his own purposes.

Now, we've got to stand back for a moment to understand why this is so significant. We've kind of landed in here. Where are we in history? What's going on? We need to orientate ourselves. And what has Jeremiah got to do with anything?

What's that talking about? Well, we find ourselves here in Ezra 1 in the first year of the reign of Cyrus, the king of Persia.

[ 8 : 44 ] And that places us in about 539 BC. The story picks up where 2 Chronicles ends off. Seventy years before these words, disaster had befallen God's people.

The Babylonian Empire swept through Jerusalem, sacked the temple in the final wave of invasions which took God's people away from their land into exile. That was 70 years prior.

That was 587 BC. Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon. He destroyed Jerusalem's defenses. He came in, burned the temple, carried away all the temple furnishings and devastated the surrounding countryside.

This is the key, low, grim point in the life of God's people. This is the real low point. Exile.

Jerusalem destroyed. The temple no longer. It does not get any worse than this for God's people. But all is not lost.

[ 9 : 49 ] There is a flicker of hope because God has made promises to His people. Stretching all the way back to the very beginning, God has made promises to His people, promises of a savior, promises of a serpent crusher, one who will once and forever rescue His people from the enemy Himself, from sin and from the curse of death.

God promised to build a kingdom, an everlasting kingdom. He has promised never to leave nor forsake His people. But whilst He has made promises never to let His people go, He also made promises never to let them off.

God has always promised great things for His people as they trust His word and respond in faith to His promises. But at the same time, there are warnings should His people disobey Him, forget Him, go their own way.

And that is what happened when the king of Babylon came in and swept everything away. That was God's right judgment as He warned for their disobedience.

And God didn't lose control when His people went into exile. Not at all. God was sovereign even over that. But He's also, as we'll see, sovereign over their return.

[ 11 : 14 ] Do you know that last verse we read? You can almost skate over it, but look again. All these did Shezbazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

That is a monumental moment. The exiles returning to Jerusalem to the promised land. God is undoing the exile. He's bringing His people back just as He promised.

So God is sovereign over their exile and over their return. And it's because of the word of the Lord that came through Jeremiah.

You see it there in the middle of verse 1. It's because this promise that came through Jeremiah that God is doing this. What was that promise? What's that talking about?

Well, no need to turn to it, but in Jeremiah chapter 29, God made this promise to His people. He said this, this is what the Lord says. This is what the Lord says. When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

[ 12 : 24 ] 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. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you.

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile. See, those are promises made years before these events in Ezra chapter 1.

See, God made wonderful promises to his people even in the face of this horrific exile. God promised them, I will bring you back. Even in the depths of that despair, there was hope.

There was a word for the future. God promised he would bring his people back. He would restore his people, allow them to be part of his unstoppable plans to build his kingdom, to bring a savior.

[ 13 : 35 ] And God had made these promises because he was a sovereign. He was the one in charge. And he's able to keep those promises. God is the one who is acting in history.

He is the one bringing about his purposes for his people. That is the deeper reality here in chapter 1. On a surface level, you look at the events of history and it's Cyrus, the Persian ruler, who grants permission to God's people to go back, to rebuild the temple.

But Ezra 1 verse 1 reveals a deeper reality. There's more going on than meets the eye. And this fact that God is the one who moves a king's heart to let his people go back, that should give us great courage today, shouldn't it?

At a time when we perhaps feel like losers, the church, especially in the West, feels at a low ebb. We're the losers, aren't we?

Nobody's talking about the church. But God has not abandoned his promises or his people. He is sovereign and this is the perspective we must not forget.

[ 14 : 55 ] In fact, this perspective on history, a perspective that understands the deepest spiritual realities must be the primary perspective with which we see everything. The fact there is a God who is in control, who is directing all of human history, that is the ultimate perspective on life that we must have.

The way things are in this world, whether politically or personally, whether in the culture or in the church, none of those things are an accident.

Nothing we see in the world or in our own lives is taking God by surprise. Nothing we see in the world is able to derail God's ultimate plans to build his church and win for himself an eternal people.

God's sovereignty is the deeper reality in this chapter. God's sovereignty operates in two ways, particularly in these verses.

God stirs up two different groups of people. He stirs the hearts of men to bring about his purposes. There are two stirrings in this chapter. The first is that God stirs up the heart of a king.

[ 16 : 16 ] Let's look again at verses one to four where we see God stirring up the heart of a king. We read here of Cyrus, the king of Persia in the first year of his reign.

Now, the preceding years have been tumultuous on the world stage. the once great and mighty Babylonian empire was no longer. That was now history. Persia was the new empire.

Cyrus now ruled over the world. But who ruled over Cyrus? Well, there was no doubt in the mind of a devout Jew who was really in charge.

As Proverbs 21 says, the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever He will. You see, there is a sovereign above our kings and world rulers.

There is a secret sovereignty of God which allows them their little moments in the twilight and the sun, a day of pomp and pride.

[ 17 : 24 ] But God can use that. He can use it to humble His own people. That sovereignty raised up Nebuchadnezzar. He then removed Belshazzar and now He's raised up a Persian king who would quite unconsciously be God's instrument for the restoration of His own people.

Cyrus was operating on His own terms according to His own purposes. The discovery of the Cyrus cylinder which you can see in the British Museum gives you an insight as to his thoughts and what He was doing at this time.

It shows that Cyrus reversed the foreign policy of previous empires. He decided to court the loyalty of those nations he had overcome by sending back deportees to their home nations, returning the exiles to their homelands, encouraging the restoration of their religious temples.

Let me read you a section from that cylinder which you can read in the British Museum. Here's what Cyrus said he was doing. He said, I returned to the sacred cities the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time.

The images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned them to their habitations.

[ 18 : 49 ] That was part of Cyrus' political maneuvering to win favor from all these nations he was now in control of. Cyrus had his plans but Ezra reveals the deeper reality.

It was God who stirred Cyrus' heart to do this. Look again at the second half of verse 1. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia.

Jeremiah, as we saw, had predicted it many years before. the exiles had prayed for it. Ezekiel and Daniel had prepared for it and now the God of Israel had dropped a new idea into this king.

A new diplomacy for him to pursue. And the doors of history swung open for God's people to return home. See, the Lord did it. The Lord moved the heart of a king so that his people could return.

something similar would happen 500 years later when the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus would commission a census of the whole Roman world.

[ 20 : 05 ] He called everyone to enroll in their own towns and all the world would be on the move again. And all that would be for one obscure carpenter with his miraculously pregnant wife to come to the village of Bethlehem in Judea where prophecy would again be fulfilled and the saviour of the world would be born.

See, God pulls the strings of emperors and Caesars for his own purposes. God did it in Ezra's day. He did it bringing about the birth of Jesus and he continues today to do that.

He is fulfilling his promises. Promises to build his kingdom. To draw people, men and women to his everlasting kingdom. And he does it using prime ministers and presidents and kings.

See, God is sovereign and he's able to stir up a heart of a king if he needs to to bring about his purposes. And so that means we can trust God to keep his promises.

And here in Ezra, the thing in view is the rebuilding of a temple. That is what Cyrus sends them back to do.

[ 21 : 23 ] Look on to verses 2, 3 and 4. He has sent them to rebuild the house for God, to rebuild the temple. That is what they've gone back to do.

And these books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are really one book, we separate them in our Bibles, but they're one book. And they chart the return of God's people to Jerusalem in three waves.

The first wave is Ezra 1-6 under the leadership of Zerubbabel. And the focus there is the rebuilding of the temple and we're going to see that over these next few weeks. The second wave is the second half of the book of Ezra under the leadership of Ezra.

So it's a bit of a misnomer because the first half Ezra doesn't appear, but the second half he does and he's leading another wave back. And in that section the focus is very much on the centrality of the word of God and the lives of God's people.

There's a spiritual reformation going on in the second half of the book. And then the third wave is recorded in Nehemiah as they return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. So there's three waves.

[ 22 : 32 ] This is the first and their task is to rebuild the temple. But why is that significant? Why this focus on rebuilding the temple? Well from the very beginning, from the very beginning of human history, the great plan and purpose of humanity was to know God, to be in his presence, to worship him and enjoy him forever.

That's what we're here for. But as the early chapters of the Bible set out, there has been a great rupture in that relationship because of sin. Humanity was cast out of God's presence, sent east of Eden, away.

But even in that moment, God promised restoration a way back. God promised deliverance, a savior. and that would ultimately be achieved in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus who made his dwelling among us and who now by his spirit dwells in his people, in his church. And one day, we will fully dwell with God forever. That's what Revelation promises us.

Behold, it says, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. That's our future.

[ 23 : 55 ] That's the destiny of humanity. And the temple, why is that so significant? Why are they going to rebuild it? Well, the temple was a foretaste of that great restoration of God dwelling with his people.

The temple was the place where God dwelt in the midst of his people in a very visible way. And there was no greater travesty for God's people than the destruction of the temple.

Those events we just read about as Nebuchadnezzar came into Jerusalem and sacked the temple. That was a horrific moment in the life of God's people. Total desecration.

It was the ultimate indication of God's judgment upon his people, of his glory departing. That was the low point in the history of God's people.

But now, in his great grace, God is providing a way back. He has stirred the heart of a pagan king to order the rebuilding of this temple.

[ 25 : 03 ] The very thing that Cyrus permits God's people to do was the very thing they ought to have prioritized as they returned to Jerusalem. the one most important thing they could have done is rebuild the temple.

And it's the one thing that Cyrus sends them to go and do. It was more vital than building their own homes, more vital than the walls of the city. The real building of the temple, the dwelling place of God, was the most vital thing they could do.

See, God can and does stir up the hearts of this world's kings in order to fulfill his promises, even in the most surprising ways. Cyrus had no idea what he was really doing, but the Lord did.

Now, our task today is not to go to Jerusalem and build a temple, but our task of building is done through the proclamation of the gospel to build the living church of living people.

God will see that it is done. God will ensure that his church is built. Now, we may feel very small and insignificant, but God will keep his promises.

[ 26 : 21 ] He will build his church and the rulers of this world will not stop it. In fact, God can use them to advance us. That is the great encouragement as we read about this king's heart being stirred.

God can still do that and he will do whatever it takes to ensure the building of his living church for all eternity. That is his promise. But Cyrus is not the only person stirred by God here.

Look on to verse 5 and 6. God stirs up not only the king but the hearts of his own people. God stirs the hearts of his own people.

Look on with me to verse 5. Then rose up the heads of the father's house 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.

So the leaders of God's people and some of the people they rise up and they go to rebuild the temple but why? Well the answer is that God stirred them.

[ 27 : 37 ] God stirred up the hearts of the people. That is the explanation behind their response. That is why they go. So God not only stirs up kings but he stirs up his own people and it's God's sovereign stirring that moves his people and this fact ought to humble God's people then and today.

I think we're often quick to credit ourselves for each new burst of obedience or some new adventure in the building of God's kingdom.

We think wasn't that a good idea? Aren't I courageous to go and do this thing? But actually the initiative never begins with God. It begins doesn't begin with us.

It begins with God. That's the point. The initiative never begins with our own hearts. No, it's the Lord who stirred his people then to go and rebuild the temple.

It's God who stirs his people today in each new venture of faith, each new thing we do. God stirs us in the first place. He's the one who gives us the desires to serve and obey him.

[ 28 : 47 ] So God not only by stirring the heart of the king opened the way for them to go, he didn't just make it possible, he also made them want to do it. He stirred their hearts so they would go to pack up their belongings, move themselves and their families all the way back to Jerusalem.

Now we might imagine that was an easy decision to make. What's the big deal? They're just going back to Jerusalem. This wasn't the case of traveling 40 miles down the M8 to Edinburgh.

How many of us would do that? This was no small thing to return to Jerusalem. This was a big undertaking. It took the Lord himself to stir their hearts, to stir their hearts to action.

Would we dare pray that the Lord would stir our hearts to fresh commitment to his gospel purposes today? Would you dare to pray that? They were moved to build the temple.

What for us today? we continue to be involved in a building project, but our materials are not bricks and mortar, but the word of God.

[ 30 : 00 ] The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the proclamation of that gospel, of calling men and women to repent and believe in Jesus. That is our task.

We're involved in building up the body of the living church. that's our building project. And all of us here, all of us, in a whole variety of ways, have roles to play in evangelizing our city and edifying the saints, of reaching out and building up.

We all have a role to play. It may well involve for some of us bricks and mortar. We do need a roof over our heads. But all of us have a different role to play, whether it's cleaning or cooking or leading a life course team or growth group or whatever it is.

All of us have a role to play. And the Lord may stir our hearts to difficult tasks. Do not imagine that the call for God's people then to rebuild the temple was an easy thing to do.

No way. We'll see as we read on this is a difficult task. It took a long time. It took decades in the end to rebuild that temple. Opposition at every turn.

[ 31 : 20 ] discouragements hardships. The Lord may call us to difficult tasks. But even then, if he stirs our hearts to that end, even then, he encourages his people.

And that is, I think, what we have in the final few verses of this section. See, God not only stirs the hearts of his people, he encourages their hearts. Verses 7 to 11.

Look with me here again. I'll read from verse 7. Cyrus, the king, also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

Cyrus, king of Persia, brought these out in the charge of Mithridath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Shezbazar, the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them, 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels.

All the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Shezbazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. Now we read over those words, and we read it once, and I read it again.

[ 32 : 36 ] You think, why have you read out this list of materials and gold? Maybe your eyes mentally glazed over as we read over those verses again. Details of gold and silver, blah, blah, blah, who cares?

But hold on and notice the significance of this. These items are painstakingly recorded for us, and they are of huge significance for the temple and for God's people.

These are the very items that Daniel chapter 1 records being taken by Nebuchadnezzar all the way back in 605 BC when he placed them in the treasury of his God.

He took them from the temple of Jerusalem and put them in his own house. And that snatching of these vessels cemented in a very visceral, visual way the total destruction of God's temple, total humiliation for God's people, defeat.

Babylon is no more. Persia is now in charge. And these items, these utensils, taken from God's house, are now being inventoried back to Shezbazar, the prince of Judah.

[ 33 : 54 ] So what's the implication? Well, these verses are saying that Babylon is no more, but the worship of God endures. See, the worship of God endures empires.

It outlasts them. The inventory we find a bit tedious actually constitutes item by item so many signs that God is at last, after all these decades, removing the stigma and the shame.

The items are going back to the temple. Now, it's hard for us, I think, to see the significance of this all these years later, but imagine you're one of God's people then. You're one of those people who said, I'm going to go.

God has stirred your heart. You're going to go back. And then you see these items being brought out and handed over to Shezbazar, one by one, counted out, all 5,400 items.



If you're one of those people, how encouraged would you have been to see that? How encouraged would you have been to see all these items coming back with you as you return to Jerusalem? them? And this is, I think, part of the kindness of God.

[ 35 : 03 ] He not only stirs his people's hearts, but he encourages their hearts too. Now, perhaps you know something of this yourself in your own life. Perhaps the Lord has stirred your heart to take a gospel risk, and so you take those initial steps, which are scary.

But how often the Lord gives us small tokens of his presence, small encouragements to assure us of his sovereignty, like these gold vessels being brought out.

Over and above his word of promise, God adds these tokens of encouragement. Not that he should have to, or that we should demand it, but notice them.

When the Lord does it, notice his kindness. We may feel, as the church, that we are the losers in this world, but know there is a greater reality.

Know that God is at work. He has made promises, and he will keep them. He is sovereign. There is nothing in this world, not even kings and presidents and prime ministers, that will stop his building program for his eternal kingdom.

[ 36 : 18 ] He is sovereign over this world. He is sovereign over kings and over his own people. He has promised his people a future and a hope. He has promised never to leave or forsake his people.

We can trust his word of promise as we seek to go about his building project that he's tasked us with, which is that call for folks to come and follow Jesus.

Remember Jesus' words, Matthew 28? He said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. All authority.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I've commanded you. And behold, I'm with you to the very end of the age.

The world will tell us the church is finished. The church has no future. But we must not read reality through the eyes of this world's media.

[ 37 : 25 ] There is a bigger story. There's a bigger reality. The church exists and it will continue to grow. It will last into eternity.

Jesus is at this moment gathering his people. He's building his church and nothing can stop us. So be encouraged. Let's pray.

Father, you've made many good promises to your people. Lord, help us to take you at your word.

to know that you are the one who directs all of human history. So please help us to trust you and help us, each of us, to give all, to give all of our energy and our time and our talents for the building of your kingdom.

Thank you that we can have absolute confidence that you are in control and that you are with us. you will never leave or forsake us. So keep us clinging to your promises before we ask it in your name.

[ 38 : 44 ] Amen.