

# Ezra 1:1-4 | David Baumgartner

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Date: 05 August 2018

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[ 0 : 00 ] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church, Knowing Jesus, Making Jesus Known. We're going to go back some 2,500 years in history.

So if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to the book of Ezra. It's in the Old Testament, right after the Chronicles. Let's start off here, who was Ezra?

Well, we really don't know very much about him. He's not in the Hebrews Hall of Faith. I couldn't find a single quote by him in the New Testament. From Ezra chapter 7, we learn that he's a priest. He's actually a Levite. He's a descendant of Aaron. But I believe most importantly to us this morning, he's a scribe. He's a historian.

In fact, I think a lot of people may say he's more like an accountant. When you see some of the verses that he will write. Ezra wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles.

[ 1 : 06 ] It's also believed by many that he wrote Psalm 119, which is the longest psalm in the Bible. And of course, he wrote this book, Ezra. Originally, and this is kind of an interesting thing here for the guys in the Sunday school.

It's believed that Ezra and Nehemiah was actually one book at one time in the Hebrew Bible. And that's probably why Origen in the 3rd century referred to them as 1 and 2 Ezra.

It's kind of an interesting thing. Just like we do 1 and 2 Chronicles. But the main point for us to see is that thanks to Ezra, we have this record of a very special time in Israel's history.

And this was when Israel was released from 70 years of captivity in Babylon. And they were allowed to return to their homeland and to build and begin a process of rebuilding what had been destroyed.

And I'm talking about Jerusalem and the temple. How did that happen? Well, actually, this is a little quick review of history here. You may recall the northern tribes of Israel had been invaded by the Assyrians.

[ 2 : 24 ] And this was in 722 BC. And then the southern tribe of Judah had been warned by various prophets. It said, if you continue to turn away from the Lord like the northern tribes did, then you will be punished severely.

And that's just what happened. If you look on your handout here from 2 Chronicles chapter 36, beginning in verse 15, it says this. The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words, scoffed at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.

And so in the year 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, who's the king of Babylon, invaded the land of Judah. And many people were taken captive and brought to Babylon.

And you may recall among them, you have Daniel and his three friends. About 20 years later, the temple, the beautiful building that Solomon had built in Jerusalem and its walls were completely destroyed by the Babylonians.

[ 3 : 46 ] And all the sacred vessels of the temple were then taken to Babylon. Some of you may recall in our men's Sunday school study in the book of Daniel, which focused on this time period, there's two aspects that I'd like to bring out this morning.

First, in chapter 9 of Daniel, he remembers this prophecy by the prophet Jeremiah regarding Israel's exile, that it was soon coming to an end.

Jeremiah 21, it says in verse 10, For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, he says, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

I want you to imagine for a minute what it must have been like for Daniel. He's in his 80s and he's been in captivity, most likely since he's been a teenager.

But God had made this promise, a promise to restore them. And right now, it's getting ready to be fulfilled. Boy, how exciting that is. That first thing is about, in Daniel, about the prophecy.

[ 4 : 57 ] Secondly, just something about King Cyrus here. Eventually, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon died. And we know from history that this man, Nabonidus, became king.

And he establishes this co-regency with his son, Belshazzar. And so, in Daniel chapter 5, verse 17, we read that Belshazzar has this drunken party one night.

And he invites all these nobles, lords, and concubines. And the wine is flowing. Everybody's having a good party and they're feeling pretty good. And he decides to bring out the sacred gold and silver vessels that had been taken from the temple.

And that night, their party gets interrupted. There's handwriting on the wall. And Daniel interprets it. And let me interpret what Daniel says.

Belshazzar, you're a goner. You're a goner. You're out of here. And that very night, 539 B.C., Belshazzar was killed.

[ 6 : 02 ] And he was replaced by one of King Cyrus' generals, Darius the Mede. And King Cyrus assumes command over the entire Median Persian kingdom, which now includes all of Babylon.

And one of the first things that King Cyrus did was to issue this decree. Wonderful time. Allowing thousands of Jews to return home and to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem and its walls.

And this is where our account in Ezra begins. Let's please read with me the first four verses of Ezra. Now, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom.

And he also put it in writing, saying, Thus says King Cyrus of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him. Let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel.

[ 7 : 31 ] He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a free will offering for the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem.

Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that we can come here today to study your word and buy it, Lord. Be transformed. There are things that are here for us today, Lord.

Things that we can not only know and understand, but things that we can apply. And we would ask, Lord, that through the power of your spirit, and the ministry of your word, that you would open our eyes, and that we would see wonderful things that we may apply to our lives.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. I want to begin by asking this question here. Why do we study Old Testament text? In the men, we're studying Daniel.

We're now studying Nehemiah. Here we're looking at Ezra. Why do we do that? You know, several churches don't study the Old Testament. But I'd like to answer this question.

[ 8 : 48 ] If you look with me in Romans 15, 4, look at what Paul said. It's on your handout. Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

Isn't that great? You know anybody who could use some hope today? Yeah, I'm sure you do. Maybe a good shot of hope. Perhaps they're feeling like their lives are just futile.

They don't really know what tomorrow brings. Maybe they need a fresh start. Maybe you're here today and that applies to you. Maybe they need to hear who Jesus is and how he fulfills the Old Testament.

Why did Jesus come? Did he just suddenly show up one day? What's the history behind him? Why did God send his son?

And how did he arrive? If those things bother anyone here or maybe someone you know, I'll tell you what, this is the place to be while we're in this book of Ezra.

[ 10 : 02 ] This morning, I just want to introduce this book. And there's three biblical truths that I'd like to start out with. I'm going to call these three takeaways about God. And I believe that these things will encourage us and that these things will give us hope, especially in the times that we live in.

First of all, here's the truth. Our God is sovereign. When we are helpless, our God is sovereign. Look with me in how this book begins.

Now, in the first year of King Cyrus, King of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord, it tells us, stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia.

And so he sent out this proclamation here. So we're starting here in the first year of King Cyrus' reign. Here's something a little bit more about King Cyrus.

Earlier, we read this prophecy in Isaiah about Israel's captivity, soon coming to an end. Did you know that there are prophecies in Isaiah about Cyrus himself?

[11:10] I included two of them here on our handout. Look with me. Isaiah 44, verse 28. Who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, she shall be built, and of the temple, your foundation shall be laid.

We see that right here. How about this other one in the next chapter, Isaiah 45? Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hordes in secret places that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

You know what's really interesting, actually amazing about this? These verses were written 150 years before Cyrus even came along.

Isn't that amazing? Who else could do that? Nobody. Our God, he's sovereign.

[12:37] Now, looking at these descriptions, a lot of people think that King Cyrus must have been a believer. He must have been a worshiper of Yahweh.

Maybe. Maybe not. When you look at that word anointed, it means that God chose this person and appointed him as his agent for a specific reason, a specific purpose, whatever that purpose may be. But here's what we do know. God is able to stir up the spirit of anybody for his purposes, whether or not they know it, whether or not they would agree with it.

God's able to do that. You want some examples? How about Pharaoh, Pharaoh? I like saying it twice because we sing a song, Pharaoh, Pharaoh. Look with me.

The Lord says in, this is Exodus chapter 4, and the Lord said to Moses, when you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.

[13:44] So that's what you're to do. But look at what he says. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. That's amazing that God did that.

He had a purpose in doing all of that. Or how about this? Here's another example. Tiglath-Pileser. I might think of him as Piglet. His name might be Pul.

I don't know. He's the king of Assyria who invaded the northern tribes of Israel. Again, after they had been given many warnings. Look with me in 1 Chronicles chapter 5.

So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria, that is Tiglath, Pilasar, piglet, king of Assyria, who took the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manassah into exile.

Friends, God is able to use anybody to achieve his purposes. He is sovereign. And you know, it makes me want to ask, who is God using in my life right now?

[14:55] I'll ask you that. Who might God be using in your life to achieve a purpose? Maybe it's a boss in whose eyes you've found favor.

Maybe it's a co-worker who gives you good advice. Maybe it's someone else who's hard on you and you think it's so unfair, but God wants to point something out in your character.

God is able to do that. We have an amazing God in heaven. And He uses people to bless us.

Here's a verse out of Proverbs, a great verse.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, and he turns it wherever he will. Our God is sovereign. Not only that, secondly, our God is faithful.

When we are hopeless, our God is faithful. Hello? When God allowed the Babylonians to invade Judah and take the Jews into captivity, I want to ask you, was He being faithful?

[16:11] Yeah. That's right. He was. I would say yes, because God had warned them and He followed through with it. God was faithful.

And I think it's good, especially when you learn from your mistakes. Would you agree with that?

Yeah. The writer of Hebrews tells us that in chapter 12, for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.

But later, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have, and this is how, to those who have been trained by it. Boy, 70 years.

That's a long time. A long time. But God is faithful. He is faithful then, and He continues to be here to Ezra and his people.

God saw to it that not only would there be a new king arising in Babylon, this king would be a benevolent king. Look with me, verse 2. Thus says Cyrus, the king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem, that is in Judah.

[17:26] Throughout the ages, we can read that various kings had these policies regarding how they treated the people that they conquered. This guy, Paul, or Piglet, the king of Assyria, he was actually very cruel to people.

And he kept the people of the northern tribes as his captives. He kept them miserable, scattered, in poverty. But King Cyrus, he's different.

He has a different policy. He allowed people to practice their individual customs and beliefs as long as they didn't go against him and the nation. If you have a chance, you might Google this thing called the Cyrus Cylinder.

I was kind of hoping to bring it. It's this nine-inch piece of clay, but it goes, it's in a British museum, and it goes back 2,500 years, so they didn't let me do it.

They found it in Iraq, but it brags about King Cyrus. And on it, it has these statements about how his policy was to bless people that he conquered.

[18:39] And he would do that by letting them return to their homeland and practice the particular religion that they had. Let's look at his decree.

There's actually several parts to it in verse 3. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him. 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. You know, what strikes me here is how King Cyrus doesn't force the Jews to leave their homes.

Instead, he's inviting them to go. He says, go with God's blessing. May your God be with you. He says, apply yourself to something that's big, something that's noble.

He says, go up to Jerusalem. Going up, it implies as an act of worship. And then he's saying, you can work together with others toward this common interest that you have.

[19:48] Rebuild the house of the Lord. He is the God who's in Jerusalem. In other words, to all of you inhabitants who were brought here, here's your choice.

Go and do this. The choice is yours. I kind of imagine that it probably was not an easy decision.

I want you to consider, you're from Jewish descent, but now you're resettled. That means that you have a home. You have crops.

You have a garden. Your kids are in a great daycare. The journey would be well over 500 miles and there's no trains, no buses.

And boy, what a huge project. Building something like they did in King Solomon's days. What would you say? Would you go?

[20:48] Or would you stay? Let me put the question this way. Are you comfortable right now living with the pagans? I'm speaking to God's people here.

If you are comfortable and you blend in well, then stay. Stay. And many of them did. But if you realize Babylon isn't your home, this world is not your home, then go.

Go. And that God, who is sovereign, He might have something different, something big, something noble for you to do.

That's the truth, friends. That's what we find through the gospel. Something noble, something glorious.

And we get to be part of it. And He says, the choice is yours. And thousands of Israelites did go. I think one of the most compelling things to me when someone first shared the gospel with me was just this chance that I can go forward with now with the Lord.

[22:14] Because to me, religion was dead. And you know, it didn't take a lot of brains to see that. People dressing up with garments and things and, you know, parading around doing these things.

People trying to get to God. But when you realize that God did it all. And I get to be part of that. And I can go. And I can be part of something bigger than myself.

I can be part of something that's glorious. I can be involved in something that's noble. Because God so loved the world. He did the work.

He gave His Son that we may have life. This book here of Ezra, it's kind of a second exodus for God's people.

There are themes of joy that we will see in this book. The dark days are over. This is a chance now to start over. Do you know anybody who would just love to just take their lives and just chuck it and say, I'm starting over with You now, Lord.

[ 23 : 24 ] Because You do it right. You are my creator. You have a handbook that tells me what pleases You and how You want my life to look.

What a great God we have. We can start over with shouts of joy. Isaiah in chapter 48 says, Go out of Babylon. Flee the Chaldea.

That's Babylon. Declare this with shouts of joy. Proclaim it. Send it out to the end of the earth. Say, This is what the Lord has, how He's redeemed His servant, Jacob.

Have we done that? Go out to the corners, the housetops, and say, Let me shout for joy of what the Lord has done for me.

He has redeemed me. The Bible tells us we are not at home. And He offers us redemption. And then He offers us, we have a place, a ministry that each one of us can be part of.

[ 24 : 31 ] Something big. Something noble. Something glorious. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

Right here, an amen there. So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, even to God, even to the Father.

Friends, that's what we're to be about here. How glorious it is. Our God is sovereign. Our God is faithful.

Third thing here to see, our God provides. When we're useless, our God provides. I'd like to continue with this decree here.

[ 25 : 51 ] Cyrus goes on in his writing, and every survivor at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and with cattle, together with a free will offering for the house of God, which is in Jerusalem.

What he's saying here, and we know this from history, is that the Jews were actually scattered throughout Babylon. And in every place, there was a survivor.

That is, a Jewish person. The Babylonians in that area, in that place, were commanded to support that man, that woman, by giving them silver and gold, by giving them cattle and goods, by giving them a free will offering.

Boy, that really sounds unusual, doesn't it? I mean, where do you find this? I mean, normally, people that have been captured in some kind of military conquest, they're not treated this way unless the Lord is your God.

He makes all the difference in the world. There's a similar thing that happened in Exodus chapter 3. The Lord was preparing Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, but Moses is kind of reluctant to go.

[ 27 : 11 ] Look with me what it says in Exodus chapter 3. I will grant, this is the Lord speaking, I will grant favor in the sight of the Egyptians, and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed, but every woman shall ask of her neighbor, and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver, and articles of gold, and clothing, and you will put them on your sons and daughters.

Thus, you will plunder the Egyptians. This term, plundering the Egyptians, that's a very interesting study to embark on.

It describes how the Israelites were not only released from captivity, they're also given the spoils of victory, and those precious materials that they're given.

They will be used to construct the tabernacle back in Moses' time, and now here in Ezra, they'll be used for the rebuilding of this new temple.

Why is that? It's so that every person can worship the Lord according to the law of Moses. As we see here, the main person responsible for rebuilding the temple is actually a man by the name of Zerubbabel, and his name means seed of Babel.

[ 28 : 34 ] He's also in the lineage of Jesus Christ. But we're also going to see that this temple that Zerubbabel builds is far less glorious than the one built by Solomon.

I want you to consider this, friends. I hope I'm not giving away anything for the brothers that have future messages. But when we look in this book, we're not going to see any lofty descriptions of gold pillar, gold-covered pillars like Solomon had in 1 Kings 7 and 8.

There's no specific mention of the Ark of the Covenant. On the day of dedication, they're going to sacrifice, get this, 100 bulls and 200 rams. Compare that to 22,000 and 120,000, respectively, of those animals.

There's no glory of the Lord present as there was when the smoke filled the temple in Solomon's day. And not only that, history is going to tell us that this temple, it will eventually fall into ruin.

And it's going to be replaced by a third temple, which is Herod's temple. And I think that ought to lead us to ask this question. If temples, one, two, and three, if they're so important, where is our temple today?

[ 30 : 05 ] Where is it? Where are our priests? Where are our sacrifices? God has provided the answer. His name is Jesus.

No other name but Jesus. All of this points to Jesus the Christ. He is the high priest. He is the sacrifice.

And He is the temple. In John chapter 2, we see that Jesus was actually in Herod's temple. And it says that He drove out the money changers out of the temple.

And they're angry with Him. And they demand a sign. Who do you think you are to do this? And if you want to look with me in John chapter 2, beginning in verse 19, Jesus answered them, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

And the Jews said, it has taken 46 years to build this temple. And you will raise it up in three days. But He was speaking about the temple of His body.

[ 31 : 15 ] When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this. And they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

If Ezra is about the temple, Jesus is our temple. And if you are a believer, you are in Christ.

And there are things for us to see in our study of Ezra and then later Nehemiah because you and I need hope.

You and I need to be instructed and comforted so that we may have hope in this land. If the musicians would come forward here. This book of Ezra, it covers an extensive period of time.

It's not a comprehensive account of all those years, but rather select episodes. And just to clarify for the men's study, Nehemiah comes some 80 years after Ezra.

[ 32 : 26 ] So just remember that as we study the book of Nehemiah. But we're going to see how the Jews do come back and rebuild the temple and they encounter opposition from the people.

The project is brought to a halt. But remember, God gives us hope. He is sovereign and He's able to influence people to bless us, whether they be kings or co-workers.

And it's all to achieve His purposes. Secondly, God's faithful. He sees our needs. You know, at one time, you and I were slaves to sin.

But God's given us a second chance. He redeemed us. And God provides that through Christ, we can have a new life. a life that's good.

A life that's noble. A life that's challenging. We get a chance to remember Jesus now. As you take those, these emblems that serve to remind us of the price that was paid, glorify Jesus.

[ 33 : 36 ] The whole Old Testament is about Him. The New Testament is about Him. And we get to worship Him as our Lord, our Savior, and our friend.

Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, thank You so much that we get a chance here to study Your Word. These words that were written some 2,500 years ago, but yet, Lord, they apply to us.

You don't change, Lord, and I'm thankful for that because You're a good God and You are good to us.

You are a good God and we can worship You with all of our hearts and minds. Thank You, Father, in the name of Jesus.

You are a good God