

Text: Ezra 1-3

God is True to His Word.

3'If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, 4then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. 5'Indeed, your threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time You will thus eat your food to the full and live securely in your land. 6'I shall also grant peace in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making you tremble I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land. 7'But you will chase your enemies and they will fall before you by the sword; 8five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you by the sword. 9'So I will turn toward you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will confirm My covenant with you. 10'You will eat the old supply and clear out the old because of the new. 11'Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. 12'I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. 13'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so that you would not be their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. 14'But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, 31'I will lay waste your cities as well and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your soothing aromas. 32'I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled over it. 33'You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste. 34'Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of the desolation, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. 35'All the days of its desolation it will observe the rest which it did not observe on your sabbaths, while you were living on it. 43'For the land will be abandoned by them, and will make up for its sabbaths while it is made desolate without them They, meanwhile, will be making amends for their iniquity, because they rejected My ordinances and their soul abhorred My statutes. 44'Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. 45'But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD.'" (Numbers 26:3-14, 31-35, 43-45)

9Now in the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it. 10At the end of three years they captured it; in the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was captured. 11Then the king of Assyria carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and put them in Halah and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, 12because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed His covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded; they would neither listen nor do it. (2 Kings 18:9-12)

11Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. (2 Chronicles 36:11-21)

10"For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. **11**'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. **12**'Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. **13**'You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. **14**'I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.' (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

*1*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 also put it in writing, saying: *2*"Thus says Cyrus 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, which is in Judah.

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. *4*'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 freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'" *5*Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. *6*All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering. *7*Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; *8*and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. *9*Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 1030 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles. *11*All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:1-11)

The history—and continued existence—of the nation of Israel demonstrates nothing if it does not demonstrate the veracity of God's promises. We see in Israel a nation that has been blessed tremendously by God. How else can one explain the continuance of a nation of people that was without a homeland (and, for some time, a language) for almost 1900 years? However, not all of the promises God has fulfilled have been positive ones. God told the Israelites through Moses that if they did not keep His covenant He would remove them from the Promised Land and scatter them among the nations. He accomplished this first with the northern tribes being conquered by the Assyrian Empire, followed by the conquest of the southern tribes by the Babylonians. Nevertheless, He made good on His promise through Jeremiah to return them after 70 years, and even caused both the ruler of the Persians (who conquered the Babylonians) and the peoples with whom the Jews sojourned to make provision for their return. This demonstrates my next point, that God is sovereign.

God is Sovereign.

21"Remember these things, O Jacob,
And Israel, for you are My servant;
I have formed you, you are My servant,
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me.

22"I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud
And your sins like a heavy mist
Return to Me, for I have redeemed you."

23Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it!
Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth;
Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it;
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob
And in Israel He shows forth His glory.

24Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb,
"I, the LORD, am the maker of all things,

Stretching out the heavens by Myself
And spreading out the earth all alone,

25Causing the omens of boasters to fail,
Making fools out of diviners,
Causing wise men to draw back
And turning their knowledge into foolishness,

26Confirming the word of His servant

And performing the purpose of His messengers
 It is I who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited!'
 And of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built.'
 And I will raise up her ruins again.
 27"It is I who says to the depth of the sea, 'Be dried up!'
 And I will make your rivers dry.
 28"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd!
 And he will perform all My desire '
 And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,'
 And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:21-28)

1Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
 Whom I have taken by the right hand,
 To subdue nations before him
 And to loose the loins of kings;
 To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
 2"I will go before you and make the rough places smooth;
 I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.
 3"I will give you the treasures of darkness
 And hidden wealth of secret places,
 So that you may know that it is I,
 The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
 4"For the sake of Jacob My servant,
 And Israel My chosen one,
 I have also called you by your name;
 I have given you a title of honor
 Though you have not known Me.
 5"I am the LORD, and there is no other;
 Besides Me there is no God
 I will gird you, though you have not known Me;
 6That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
 That there is no one besides Me.
 I am the LORD, and there is no other,
 7The One forming light and creating darkness,
 Causing well-being and creating calamity;
 I am the LORD who does all these.
 (Isaiah 45:1-7)

This part of Isaiah consists of God giving a monologue about His power, greatness, and sovereignty. This is an eloquent and powerful passage, and one which, unfortunately, time will not allow us to discuss in detail. The focus of this passage for the purposes of today's lesson is upon verse 28 of chapter 44 through verse 7 of chapter 45. Here, God names Cyrus as His instrument for enabling the Jews to return to Palestine. This is important not only because Isaiah named Cyrus—by name—as God's appointed deliverer 200 years before the event, but also because God here indicated His power even over those that do not acknowledge Him as God. (Consider 45:5: **I will gird you, though you have not known Me.**) While Cyrus on some level appears to have recognized the deity of God, the statement in Ezra 1:3, **He is the God Who is in Jerusalem**, seems to suggest that Cyrus approached Him as only one of the many regional deities which were worshipped throughout his expansive kingdom. Regardless of his feelings toward God, God chose to use Cyrus, and therefore Cyrus fulfilled God's purposes. We would do well to remember Cyrus whenever our thinking tends to over-emphasize human free will at the expense of God's sovereignty over everything and ever one. His power is *not* limited by our thoughts, feelings, or desires.

The Old Covenant Demanded Racial Purity, and Fidelity to Ancient Inheritances

Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. 2These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3the sons of Parosh, 2,172; 4the sons of Shephatiah, 372; 5the sons of Arah, 775; 6the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812; 7the sons of Elam, 1,254; 8the sons of Zattu, 945; 9the sons of Zaccai, 760; 10the sons of Bani, 642; 11the sons of Bebai, 623; 12the sons of Azgad, 1,222; 13the sons of Adonikam, 666; 14the sons of Bigvai, 2,056; 15the sons of Adin, 454; 16the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, 98; 17the sons of Bezai, 323; 18the sons of Jorah, 112; 19the sons of Hashum, 223; 20the sons of Gibbar, 95; 21the men of Bethlehem, 123; 22the men of Netophah, 56; 23the men of Anathoth, 128; 24the sons of Azmaveth, 42; 25the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah and Beeroth, 743; 26the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621;

27the men of Michmas, 122; 28the men of Bethel and Ai, 223; 29the sons of Nebo, 52; 30the sons of Magbish, 156; 31the sons of the other Elam, 1,254; 32the sons of Harim, 320; 33the sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 725; 34the men of Jericho, 345; 35the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

Priests Returning

36The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; 37the sons of Immer, 1,052; 38the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; 39the sons of Harim, 1,017.

Levites Returning

40The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. 41The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. 42The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139. 43The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, 44the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, 45the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, 46the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmal, the sons of Hanan, 47the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, 48the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, 49the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, 50the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim, 51the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 52the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 53the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 54the sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha. 55The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, 56the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 57the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami. 58All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. 59Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households and their descendants, whether they were of Israel: 60the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652.

Priests Removed

61Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name. 62These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. 63The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim. 64The whole assembly numbered 42,360, 65besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women. 66Their horses were 736; their mules, 245; 67their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720. 68Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. 69According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments. 70Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities. (Ezra 2:1-70)

What a lengthy, seemingly extraneous passage! I can see two possible reasons for including this genealogical record. First, the Old Covenant demanded racial purity. Only the verifiably legitimate descendants of Israel were allowed to worship in the Temple.

2''No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the LORD. 3''No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD, 4because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. 5''Nevertheless, the LORD your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the LORD your God loves you. 6''You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days. 7''You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land. 8''The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 23:2-8)

The rules regarding priests were even more strict, demanding not only legitimacy of lineage as traced through the father, but also that those fathers only marry women meeting stringent requirements. Anyone that could not demonstrate these traits was excluded.

13''He shall take a wife in her virginity. 14''A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people, 15so that he will not profane his offspring among his people; for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.''' (Leviticus 21:13-15)

10''No layman, however, is to eat the holy gift.... (Leviticus 22:10a)

Another possible reason for including this information had to do with the transfer of property. In short, the Mosaic Law forbade the long-term transfer of property between families and/or tribes. Ancestral lands were to remain with the families that first took possession of them when Israel entered the Promised Land. Any sale lasted only until the year of Jubilee. The recovery of ancestral lands may be another reason for keeping and including these detailed records, though *I think* it is secondary in importance to the establishment of one's qualification for inclusion in Temple worship.

9"Thus no inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another tribe, for the tribes of the sons of Israel shall each hold to his own inheritance." (Numbers 36:9)

14" You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess. (Deuteronomy 19:14)

23'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me. 24'Thus for every piece of your property, you are to provide for the redemption of the land. 25'If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold. 26'Or in case a man has no kinsman, but so recovers his means as to find sufficient for its redemption, 27then he shall calculate the years since its sale and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and so return to his property. 28'But if he has not found sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he has sold shall remain in the hands of its purchaser until the year of jubilee; but at the jubilee it shall revert, that he may return to his property. (Leviticus 25:23-28)

Sidebar: Gratitude for the Removal of Such Requirements

As a side note, aren't we glad that God established a new covenant which includes us outsiders?

31"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. 33"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

23And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. 25As He says also in Hosea,

**"I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,'
AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'"**

26"AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,'

THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD." (Romans 9:23-26)

The People Had Their Priorities Straight: Temple Worship Reinstated

1Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. 2Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. 3So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; 5and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD. 6From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. 7Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

8Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to

oversee the work of the house of the LORD. 9Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God. 10Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. 11They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, 13so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:1-13)

The returning exiles recognized their dependence upon God and, we can presume, their sin. Therefore, the reestablishment of burnt sacrifices was of paramount importance. As we will see more vividly in the following chapters, the Jews were surrounded, as they are today, by peoples that did not want them there. The Jews knew that they needed to actively petition God for the protection and provision which they needed and yet of which they were admittedly unworthy. Although we will also see that the adherence of these individuals to the Law in the following months and years was sporadic at best, at least at this point they acknowledged Who God is, what they owed Him, and how dependent they were upon Him. We, too, would do well to frequently consider and diligently seek to obey the following verses.

4"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! 5"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

33"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)