

Stay In Jerusalem

The Two Edicts

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Please turn to the book of Ezra. This book, by the way, will be a good place for a finger, as most of my quotations this morning coming from Ezra, and its fellow book, Nehemiah. I guess more than any other book in God's Word, the book of Ezra records the decrees of Gentile kings. There are four of them to be exact. Today, I want to focus on two of those decrees, the first and the last. The one by Cyrus the Great, and then we will take a look at the last one, which was made by Artaxerxes.

Although issued by pagan monarchs, both of these decrees praise the Great God. Both had mighty influence on God's people of the time. More importantly for our purposes, both decrees tell us—the remnant of God's church—something that is very important of what God expects of us today in these last days.

We will see that God handed to the people, who returned from captivity in Babylon, and their descendents, the opportunity of a lifetime. But, they failed to seize that opportunity. Yes, it is true that they did achieve what God required, historically. They did reestablish a Jewish community of sorts into which Christ could be born centuries later. To the purpose of God, that was absolutely necessary of course. But by and large, and beyond that, these individuals who left Babylon and their descendents did not even come close to reaching the spiritual and the personal potential God offered them. We will see that their lifestyle demonstrated that they never really left Babylon at all.

Let us spend some time looking at the remnant and its descendents. We will look at their opportunities, at their successes, at their failures, and their lessons for us. We will take a look at the first of the two decrees.

Ezra 1:1-4 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LOORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LOORD 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, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LOORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who 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 build the house of the LOORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver

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and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God, which is in Jerusalem.

Many stayed in Babylon, and they did not go back to Jerusalem. But about 47,000 did return. They returned for what purpose? Well Cyrus is absolutely explicit, and he says that God commanded him to build a house, which is in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. That word Jerusalem there appears four times in that brief proclamation. But did the returnees do what God wanted them to do? For that matter, did they even do what Cyrus wanted them to do? The answer to those questions is "yes" and "no." Let me explain.

First, consider that most of the returnees failed to return to Jerusalem. Ezra 2 contains a catalog of those who "returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city" (verse 1). Now, obviously to some, "his own city" meant Jerusalem. But, many returned to the city of their inheritance, cities and towns in the territories of Benjamin and Judah, surrounding Jerusalem. The remnant, then, did not effectively repopulate Jerusalem. As a consequence, Jerusalem did not experience economic and political rebirth upon the repatriation of these 47,000 Jews.

Please turn to Nehemiah 1 for another witness to this fact. Here, Nehemiah's brother, Ranani, has just returned from Jerusalem. Nehemiah asks him about the conditions of "the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem" (verse 2). Ranani replies:

Nehemiah 1:3 The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.

This passage refers to a time some one hundred years after Zerubbabel and Joshua led the original returnees, the remnant, back to Judah.

Nehemiah 7:4 Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few, and the houses were not rebuilt.

About a century had passed since the days that Zerubbabel and Joshua had come, and Jerusalem, the leading city of the Jews, remained an unimpressive, unimportant center; its walls still broken down. Yes, it is clear that some Jews lived there, intermixing with

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many Gentiles. But, it is equally clear that the city had not been rejuvenated, or rebuilt to any notable extent. That is why I answered, "Yes and no." The people and their leaders were half-hearted in fulfilling the decree of Cyrus; most failed to resettle Jerusalem.

What about the second part of Cyrus' decree, that the returnees rebuild the Temple? Remember, the rebuilding of the Temple was the reason that they left Babylon in the first place. Notice what actually happened. Ezra 3 describes the situation shortly after the remnant reached the Holy Land. Ezra 3:1 relates that, "The people of Israel were in the cities." This is plural meaning that they were in their cities, not just in Jerusalem. The Feast of Trumpets rolls around. The remnant "gathered together as one man to Jerusalem." They constructed a makeshift altar for the offerings God commanded for the fall Holy Days. They freely gave money for the rebuilding the Temple. As verse 8 points out, a few months later the Temple's foundations were completed. And, the people rejoiced, and all that was good.

Then, they experienced resistance from the Gentiles in the area, Gentiles who had no interest in seeing the Temple rebuilt, or the revitalized Jewish community, which a reestablished Temple service would inevitably bring. The Gentiles knew that a reconstructed Temple would become a rallying point for the Jews, and attract more and more of them from the east in Babylon. The Gentiles effectively resisted further construction of the Temple, finally gaining an injunction from King Darius, putting a stop to its reconstruction. You will find that in Ezra 4:24.

What did the remnant do then? Did they call a fast? Did they send emissaries to Darius to plead their case? Did they pray to God for His help? Well, from what is stated, brethren, they did none of that! Basically, they just rolled over and played dead. And, that was very bad!

What were they thinking, what was in their mind, brethren? The prophet Haggai tells them and us their mindset, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (Haggai 1:2). That is how they interpreted the royal order to stop rebuilding the Temple. So, they went about their own private business, building their "paneled houses," as the prophet mentions in verse 4, while God's Temple remained in ruins.

For almost two decades they did not prosper! Remember, these people had a direct mandate to rebuild the Temple. But, so half-hearted were they, so lacking in zeal for the house of their God, that they went to sleep at the first resistance they experienced, and, like Rip Van Winkle, they slept for about twenty years.

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So, to the question, "Did the remnant rebuild God's Temple?" I answer again, "yes" and "no." Yes, it did get built, but after years of delay. No, Cyrus who claimed that God had commanded him to rebuild it, never saw it. The people were lukewarm. They did keep the Holy Days, at least sometimes, and the weekly Sabbaths, when it was convenient, as we will see. They did give; and they did sacrifice. But, they lacked stamina and endurance, and they would not, or could not, sustain their efforts over a long period of time. Lacking resolve, they quickly became discouraged when their foes seemed to get the upper hand.

Let us turn our attention now to the second decree.

About eighty years after the people completed the Temple's rebuilding, God raised up two men to do what Zerubbabel and Joshua, both now long dead, had left undone. Ezra was the first of these two men to arrive in Jerusalem. The second man, Nehemiah, arrived about 13 years later. They were contemporaries, working as a team in carrying out their task. The second decree, although issued specifically to Ezra, encapsulates the commission under which both of these men labored.

Ezra 7:12-14 Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace. And so forth. I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you. And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand.

We will see that that was very important, brethren, and that was to be the focus of the work of Ezra, and Nehemiah; they were to concentrate on God's law.

Ezra 7:25 And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God, and teach those who do not know them. Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

Here is a remarkable document, to put it mildly. This royal decree is far, far more comprehensive, than Cyrus' ever was.

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1. It commissioned Ezra to establish a civil government in Judah, that is, to "set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people" according to God's Law;
2. It authorized him to institute an ecclesiastically-centered educational system which would teach God's Law to "those who do not know" it;
3. It empowered him to visit quick punishment on those who refuse to "observe the law of your God," up to and including the death penalty.

What was God doing here? God was expressing His purpose to reestablish the theocracy in Israel. The Davidic Monarchy was out of sight having gone way off in Ireland. Now, Israel could be ruled again, directly by God. This decree authorizes Ezra (notice that Ezra is clearly a priest, from the tribe of Levi; he is not a king, not of the tribe of Judah) to establish God's Law as the law of the land in Israel.

This was the opportunity that God was giving the remnant, and to their descendants, to re-institute a form of the theocracy as in the days of Moses. It mattered not to God that Gentile leaders, and pagan monarchs held political and military power over the land. God had already demonstrated, through the decrees of Cyrus and Artaxerxes, that He could bring such leaders to heel. They were putty in His hands, and they would serve His purposes.

But what He absolutely needed, and what that theocracy needed in order for it to work, brethren, was that they be separated from Babylon. God needed them to be separated from the peoples of the lands around them. God needed their cooperation in that way, because the theocracy of God absolutely requires that the people be separated, that they be sanctified. That is the basic requirement for God's government to work.

What were they to be separated from? Well, not just separation from the city of Babylon in a physical sense, and not just the migration of His people from one pagan center to another. He needed more than that. Notice Nehemiah 10:28, which is perhaps a key passage in my comments today. This is really a powerful scripture, because it tells us not only what we are to separate from, but also what we are to separate to.

Nehemiah 10:28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God.

God had brought a remnant of Israel out of Babylon, physically, and He wanted that remnant to separate itself morally, religiously, and ethically from the Gentile people around them—the world. How could they do that? After all Gentile governments ruled

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them. Well, they were to separate themselves by obeying God's Law. Not by migrating to some mountaintop to live as hermits. No, God's way of separation is that each person, individually, obey His Law. The act of obedience to God's law, in and of itself, separates you from the world, and from the ways of man.

Let us continue in Nehemiah 10, where we will see some of the areas in which God expected His people to separate themselves from the pagans around them.

First, they were to separate from the religious culture of the pagans. This is summarized in the injunction concerning intermarriage.

Nehemiah 10:30 We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons.

Ezra 2 points out that intermarriage had become widespread by this time, and the Jewish leaders were "foremost in this trespass," but the people were involved in it as well. The issue was not one of race, for the Israelites were in many cases people that we would term "white" people. But, they were pagan people, people that no matter what color, they were not of Israel, and they were not of God.

Nehemiah experienced the same problem that Ezra had encountered earlier. Nehemiah 13:23, records his realization of the scope of the problem:

Nehemiah 13:23-24 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.

This sounds like the situation in America today. Nehemiah went on to admonish:

Nehemiah 13:26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin.

God knew from experience that it was not good if His people intermarried with the followers of pagan religions, and God wanted His people separated from the peoples of

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the land, religiously, culturally from their ways of living.

Secondly, God wanted His people to be separated from the pagans in the way that they conducted business. Notice Nehemiah 10:31, where the people promise that, "if the peoples of the land bring wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and that we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exaction of every debt."

In this regard, notice Nehemiah 5. This passage records that the Jewish leaders had fallen into the pagan practice of enslaving the common people, forcing them to mortgage their land. Nehemiah, "became very angry," and he, "rebuked the nobles and rulers." You find that in Nehemiah 5:6-7.

Notice his argument:

Nehemiah 5:9 Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

Nehemiah makes it plain that Israel was to be an example, different from the other nations. Economically, that meant following God's Law concerning the taking of interest from another Israelite. For the rich to enslave their own people, through banking policy, was the way of the nations, the way of Babylon, the way of get. Israel was to avoid that at all costs as a matter of public and private policy.

As well, separation from the business practices of the pagans involved keeping the weekly Sabbaths, the Holy Days, and the land Sabbath. In Nehemiah 13:15 and following, Nehemiah learns of fieldwork and trading taking place on the Sabbath day. In response to this, Nehemiah "contended with the nobles."

Nehemiah 13:18 "Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

The nations sin in this way; but Israel is to be different, not like the Gentiles. Nehemiah spent a lot of time and effort rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. Do you ever wonder why God was so interested in building a wall around Jerusalem that He spent practically a whole book talking about it? And it was the book of Nehemiah.

Why was a wall necessary, brethren? Was it to protect Jerusalem? Did God need a wall to protect Jerusalem? Was it to make it like other cities, like Babylon for instance? Babylon had a very high wall, and before it was conquered it was considered an insuperable city because it had two walls, and those walls were eleven feet thick around it. Those walls were so thick that they used to race chariots around the top of it! Would the Jews need a wall like that? I do not think so! For it is clear that God wanted to make Jerusalem different from other cities, not like them.

Ezra 9 gives us a hint about the real purpose of the wall, its real meaning. In Ezra 9:9, where Ezra, upon hearing of the peoples' prevalent practice of intermarriage, is praying to God.

Ezra 9:9 For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Notice, the wall is not just in Jerusalem, but in Judah. Yet, neither Nehemiah, nor Ezra, not anyone for that matter, built a physical wall around the entire territory of Judah. Ezra is referring to a different wall, a wall of separation between Israel and the Gentiles. That is what the wall represented.

The wall was more than physical. The wall was an emblem of Israel's separation from the Gentiles around her. That is why Nehemiah told the pagans, recorded in Nehemiah 2:20, "You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." You are on the outside of the wall—outside Jerusalem.

In this sense, Jerusalem's rebuilt wall prefigures another wall, which will be the one that is to be around the New Jerusalem of a future time. For that city, the New Jerusalem, will have a "great and high wall" around it (Revelation 21:12). Subsequent verses describe that wall in some detail.

Why a wall around a city where there will be no war, and there will be no reason to protect that city at all? Wars will be a thing of the past. Well, the wall marks separation from sin and from evil, as Revelation 21:27 points out:

Revelation 21:27 But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

It is interesting to note that Nehemiah used his wall exactly for that purpose, to separate Israel from the world. Nehemiah 13:15 and following, tells how he closed Jerusalem's gates on the Sabbath, to keep out those who would do business on that day. Evil-doers could not get in Jerusalem. Now there are some differences, because it says that the gates of the New Jerusalem will never be closed. At that time, anyone that wants to go God's way will be able to do that, and will be able to serve God.

Both of the decrees that we have examined commanded that something be built. Cyrus' decree ordered the building of the Temple, something very concrete. Artaxerxes ordered the creation of something less tangible, the founding of a community that would be ruled by God's Law. Such a community, such a theocracy, required a wall; it required that the people separate themselves from the godless world around them. It required sanctification, signified or symbolized by the wall. So, we can say that the first decree ordered the creation of a temple in Jerusalem; the second decree ordered the creation of a wall around Jerusalem.

In the construction of these two structures, the physical temple and the wall of separation from the pagan world, the people cooperated with God more or less. Yes, they rebuilt the Temple, finally. Yes, they reestablished Jerusalem as a commercial and religious center. Yes, they separated themselves from pagan culture, for a while. And, yes, they did keep the Sabbath for a while, when it was convenient. And, yes, so zealous were they that they made a covenant with God, they "took an oath" to walk in God's Law. You can read all about that covenant in Nehemiah 10. You cannot help, when reading some parts of Ezra and Nehemiah, but feel the people to be sincere, dedicated, and almost devout.

But, brethren, look at a little bit deeper, scratch the surface and you will find them to be very half-hearted, very lukewarm, and shall we say, Laodicean? Ezra's and Nehemiah's wars against intermarriage demonstrate the peoples' pathetically feeble and frail commitment to God's way. I can only summarize the matter here.

Ezra fought the battle first, as recorded in Ezra 9 and 10. He convinced the people to stop intermarrying with the Gentiles, and in fact, to put away their foreign wives. Later, in Nehemiah 13, we read how Nehemiah had to fight the same war. Afterward, he left Jerusalem to return to the Persian King for a while. God's Word (see Nehemiah 13:6) does not indicate how long he was away, but it was probably a few years. When he returned, he had to fight the same battle all over again, and you will find that recorded in the very last verses of Nehemiah 13.

The people, both the populace and their leaders, were fickle. They would not obey God consistently, unswerving, faithfully. The covenant they made was not worth the parchment on which it was written. They would not sanctify themselves, would not consistently separate themselves from the Gentiles and their godless ways. They, for that reason, failed to reestablish the theocracy, the government of God.

These people never really left Babylon. They never really came to obey God fully, and whole-heartedly. They brought Babylon back with them.

Perhaps more than any thing else, sports indicates the condition of a peoples morality; sports make up a great barometer of their values. So it is then, that the athletic games, speak loud of the Jews' refusal to separate themselves from the pagan world.

You see, the athletic games were dedicated to Greek gods; and the games were a Gentile institution, pure and simple. But certainly, these worldly Jews reasoned, there can be nothing wrong with a little competition. There is nothing wrong with naked young men parading all over the place, throwing the discus, and running footraces, and such.

They really were not well dressed in those days. Now, anyone who knows anything about God's attitude toward nakedness would understand that this is not right. But not the Jews of the time after Ezra's and Nehemiah's deaths. They built an athletic stadium, like the ones in Greece, just below the Mount Moriah, just below the Temple.

You see, the Greeks did not like circumcision; they considered it an unnatural mutilation of the body. And, they laughed the young Jewish athletes to scorn. The solution was to tear down the stadium, and spurn the games as the pagan institution they were. But no, the Jew's found another solution, one that made up in inventiveness what it lacked in righteousness. They actually developed a surgery, which "undid" circumcision; it apparently made the young men look as if they had never been circumcised.

You see it is true that these Hellenized Jews, completely in thrall to the pagan Greek culture and religion of this world, had fallen away so far as to deny and reject the covenant of circumcision, the sign they were God's people.

Babylon and Jerusalem became one and the same!

And so it was that after Ezra and Nehemiah had gone the way of all flesh, that the people sank lower and lower, generation after generation, into the mire of this world's ways.

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By the time Christ came, the Jewish leaders were nothing more than puppets to the Romans; they were totally in thrall to the Iron Kingdom. The "wall," and you understand what I mean by the wall, was by then as much rubble then as it was when Nehemiah had found it. As in the days of Jeremiah, when the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple, the Herodian Temple of Christ's time had become all-important, while the Law had become expendable. Remember the Pharisees dodged their responsibility, as stated in God's Law, to care for their aged parents, claiming the money was for the Temple.

These people disobeyed God's law. The charge that they finally trumped up against Christ, at the end, was that He had said He would destroy the Temple. As in Jeremiah 7, these people cried, "the Temple, the Temple, the Temple," while they wallowed in the ways of Babylon—the ways of this world. And in less than forty years after Christ's resurrection, the Jews paid the price. They lost the Temple again; they lost Jerusalem again; they became scattered again.

These people saw physical ruin because they refused to separate themselves from the Gentiles around them by obeying God's Law. They despised the opportunity that God had given to them. They stayed in Babylon.

Hebrews 12 teaches us something about these peoples' example to us. These people came from a physical Babylon to reside in a physical Jerusalem.

We, as Hebrews 12:22 asserts, "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

Brethren, I think that most of you know that is the same Jerusalem that we spoke of earlier, that is the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21. It is the city that will come eventually to come to this planet. Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:6 that God already has, "made us sit together in Heavenly places." Brethren, we have already come in spirit to dwell in the New Jerusalem. And, we have not found that Jerusalem to be devastated; its walls are not rubble. God has not asked that we re-construct them. But, brethren, we had better make sure that we stay within the walls of Jerusalem, and that we remain separated from the ways of this world, and that we stay away from Babylon.

If we leave those walls to join the world, we face spiritual ruin—spiritual destruction—just as surely as our forefathers experienced physical ruin because they would not stay within the walls, hedged in by God's Law.

Brethren, stay within the walls of the New Jerusalem. Do not sneak outside, ever so

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tentatively, ever so coyly, ever so gently, and ever so foolishly. Do not compromise with God's Law in any way—with the Sabbath, with the laws of tithing, or more importantly, with real meat of God's Law concerning the love of God's people.

Stay within the walls! As Melvyn mentioned in the opening prayer, God has empowered us to be sanctified, to remain sanctified, and to be separated through His Holy Spirit. We can cease the opportunity that God offers us. We can succeed, where others who have gone before us have failed.