

The House of God

Ezra 1:1-3

Let me remind you about one of the most prominent promises found in the New Testament. Jesus is talking to his disciples, and Peter proclaims Jesus' identity so forthrightly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus then responds to Peter, representative of all of the apostles, promising him this:

Mat. 16:18 "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

What a triumphant declaration! No reservations. No conditions. No doubt. "I will build my church!" And that, despite the opposition of the inhabitants of hell. "I will build my church."

So what does that mean? Certainly, it must mean that when Jesus returns in triumph and judgment at the end of the age, the church will be present. And successful! The church will successfully go to all the nations, in accordance with the Great Commission which we studied last week at the end of Matthew's gospel. Then we read in 1 Corinthians 15 about the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of all true believers. And we read of Jesus' second coming.

1 Cor. 15:24 "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."

He must reign, he will reign, until he has put all his enemies under his feet. And then comes the end. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now, that isn't a promise that every single local congregation will survive and exist

to the end. Churches close all the time. But those exceptions don't invalidate the rule. Jesus Christ is the head of his church, and thus the church shall always prevail. Throughout this age, the church shall go and make disciples of all nations, with the confidence of Jesus' promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

That is the context for our study of Ezra. So I stand in this pulpit to proclaim and expound the word of God, that God is building his church, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is a new book for us to study. Quite a contrast to the book of Matthew. But actually, it is a continuation of that book. In the context of Old Testament history and prophecy, Ezra pictures for us, as a symbol and a type, what Jesus means without that promise to build his church. It is fair to say that the fullness of the gospel is pictured for us in the life of the nation of Israel, so we are not merely studying history in the book of Ezra. Rather, we are studying the history of redemption. We are studying the outworking of redemption. The context, in the Old Covenant, is of course to prefigure Jesus Christ. To prepare the way for Christ. To present him in figures and shadows, in types and prophecies, and that is what we will do. My goal is clear, and my purpose for choosing the study the book of Ezra is well-defined. I chose the book as the subject for our study because it so clearly presents to us the building of the church.

So as we begin Ezra, let me use that as a clear example and illustration of what I mean by the shadows and types of the Old Covenant compared to the reality that is revealed in the New Covenant. In the New Covenant, we have the church. Jesus will build that church. And so we read this,

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the

apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

The New Testament church is the household of God. It is a structure built upon a foundation, a building. A dwelling place. A holy temple. Now, go back to the picture and pattern of the Old Covenant. There we read about the temple in Jerusalem, which is the house of God, his dwelling place with his people Israel. Please make that direct connection! The house of God which was built in Jerusalem is a type, a picture, even a revelation of the house of God which is now identified as the church.

So we enter the context of the book of Ezra. When Ezra is written, the people of Israel had been in exile for 70 years. They had been captured by the Babylonians, or Chaldeans, and removed from their land. The history of Ezra picks up right where 2 Chronicles leaves off.

2 Chron. 36:17 “Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave them all into his hand. 18 And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all these he took to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. 20 And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”

The next verses are identical to our text in Ezra. The year was 536 BC. Seventy years had passed. Nebuchadnezzar had given way to his son and grandson, Belshazzar. And then to Darius the Mede, who gave way to Cyrus King of Persia. Babylon had fallen. But God would build his church. God would build his house.

v.1-2

There is something extremely important in this reference to this Persian King Cyrus. Namely, that he was prophesied, by name, 150 years before he was even born! Cyrus was named as the deliverer of God’s people about 180 years before it actually happened! Let me read to you that prophecy, found in,

Isaiah 44:24 “Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, And He who formed you from the womb: “I am the LORD, who makes all things, Who stretches out the heavens all alone, Who spreads abroad the earth by Myself; 25 Who frustrates the signs of the babblers, And drives diviners mad; Who turns wise men backward, And makes their knowledge foolishness; 26 Who confirms the word of His servant, And performs the counsel of His messengers; Who says to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be inhabited,’ To the cities of Judah, ‘You shall be built,’ And I will raise up her waste places; 27 Who says to the deep, ‘Be dry! And I will dry up your rivers’; 28 Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,” And to the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.” ’ 45:1 “Thus says the LORD to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut: 2 ‘I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the LORD, Who call you by your name, Am the God of

Israel. 4 For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.”

Something jumps out of those verses, something so obvious that many people today miss it completely.

I. THE LORD IS THE ACTIVE DIRECTOR OF ALL HISTORY.

Please don't get lost in this broad overview of Old Testament history. The point is simple. God is bringing all things to pass according to his own purpose, for he “works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

God is the active director of all history. That is, history is HIS story. History, and all the events of history, come to pass according to God's sovereign will and purpose. We call the doctrine providence, God's work which our Shorter Catechism defines as “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.”

God is in control of everything. The more fuller statement is in our Confession, “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

In other words, the Lord brings to pass exactly what he predicts, exactly what he promises. Life is not random. Life is not meaningless. Life is not hopeless. We do not live in a system of fatalism, nor should we ever despair. For God is in control. That sovereign control is emphasized by the use of a glorious title in verse 2.

A. The Lord, the God of Heaven.

Not just any God. The Lord, which is his personal name, Yahweh. The covenant-keeping God of Israel. He is the God of heaven, the God who rules from heaven, who sits on high upon his throne in heaven. That is the God who “works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

How does he do it? How does the God of Heaven exercise his control over the earth? A glorious method. By his word.

B. The Word of the Lord.

So look how Ezra begins.

v.1

“...that the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...” God accomplishes his purposes in the world by the power of his word. Or, I might say, by the word of his power. That's what we read about Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, in,

Heb. 1:3 “...who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power.”

The word of his power. The word God speaks is the word by which he acts. Remember all the way back to creation, it was by his word that God created the heavens and the earth. The word of power.

Gen. 1:3 “And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”

God spoke, and by the word of his power, he created the world. Clearly, that is a reference to Jesus who is that word of the Lord, in the flesh. We read in John's gospel,

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made...14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Such a glorious title for the Lord, the God of heaven. A glorious method for his control over all the events of history, he speaks and accomplishes his will by the word of his power. And in that context, this great and glorious God exerts,

C. A personal influence upon the spirit of men.

v.1b "...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."

Cyrus was used by God to accomplish his own purpose. Cyrus was governed by God, so that Cyrus' own actions were ordained by God himself. If you remember when I read it, Isaiah calls Cyrus God's "anointed." We also read in Isaiah, "He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose."

There is a reason why all of that is so important, which is to emphasize that God continues to accomplish his own good and perfect will. And, therefore, that you can have great encouragement and hope, no matter what the circumstances of your own life. Don't read over all this stuff and leave in the realm of dry, dusty orthodox, or irrelevant Old Testament history. Rather, beloved, behold your God. This is your God, the Lord, the God of heaven. And he accomplishes his will perfectly. Thus we can have the confidence of the Apostle Paul in,

Rom. 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

This perspective of God enables you to gain the triumphant sense of the conclusion of that chapter,

Rom. 8:35 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So all of this matters greatly! And is of great encouragement to all of God's people today. The Lord is the active director of all history.

Secondly, let's look at what the Lord would accomplish through Cyrus. And again, I want to focus on the broad picture of redemption. This event in the life of Old Testament Israel serves as a description of our relationship with God to this today. And in that broad context, what I want to emphasize is that,

II. THE LORD HAS ONE CENTRAL FOCUS FOR ALL HISTORY.

It is not simply that some old nation named Israel will return to some little piece of land in the middle east. But rather, the main point is that,

A. God will build his house.

You see, this text is not just about Israel. It is not just about the history of Israel. This text is about God. This book is about the work of God. And there is one central focus for that work of God, and it has to do with this house. This temple. Israel would return to their land so that they could build God's house, a temple.

v.2

v.3

God will build his house. God will build his church. The promise is one and the same.

For Ezra, the house was, of course, the temple. The temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonian army when they came in and conquered. God would rebuild that house. God would anoint King Cyrus to allow the people of Israel to go back to Israel to rebuild that house.

The question is, why is that so important? And the answer is as clear as it can possibly be. The house of God is the place where God would dwell among his people. God's house was the place where God's presence would be made known. That's not hard to understand, is it? If you want to find me, come to my house. That's where I live. If you want to visit with me, if you want to meet with me, if you want to talk to me, then come to my house.

The central promise of God's covenant with his people is that he would live with them, that he would dwell with them. And the house of God is that dwelling place! Actually, it is proper to say that heaven is the dwelling place of God. But in his covenant relationship with his people, God establishes a piece of heaven here on earth. An embassy, if you will, like those embassies which our country establishes in the midst of foreign nations. The dwelling place of God. That was the place where God's name

dwelt, the place that the presence of his name was made known among the people of Israel. Simple idea. God's house. The house would be in Jerusalem, verse 2, so God would be in Jerusalem, verse 3.

And because God is present in his house, that house would be the place of worship. So that's really the importance of this whole idea of rebuilding God's house.

B. God is present to be worshiped in his house.

Worship comes first! The place of worship would be built first. If you go back to 1 Kings 8, where Solomon prays at the dedication of that temple when it had been finally complete. The focus of the prayer was upon the worship that would take place in this house as the dwelling place of God on earth.

1 Kings 8:27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! 28 Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O LORD my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You today: 29 that Your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place of which You said, My name shall be there,' that You may hear the prayer which Your servant makes toward this place. 30 And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive."

So the importance of rebuilding the house of God is to reestablish the place where God would be worshiped. And that will be our focus next week. But let me end today where I began the whole of our worship service, the call to worship. When I read that call to worship, it is not an invitation to take your seat and get ready. Rather, you need to be ready already because that call to

worship notes the presence of God among us, and it is an invitation to stand before God in his house. It is the beginning of worship, when we sing for pleasure because of the presence of God. And please let me emphasize again and again, it is the presence of God that makes this place so glorious. It is the presence of God that makes this worship service so delightful, and so profound. What matters here, most of all, is your awareness of the glory of the presence of God. So often we focus on one another, on who else is here. Or who isn't here. We focus upon our own mood or our own experiences. We focus upon what we get out the service or how many of the hymns we know well. But more than all that, much more than all that, we need to comprehend the glory of the presence of God.

So we sing together,

Psalm 84:1 "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!
2 My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 3 Even the sparrow has found a home, And the swallow a nest for herself, Where she may lay her young—Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, My King and my God. 4 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You."

Blessed are you, you people of God, for you are here in God's house to sing his praise this afternoon. And that is the blessing that is made so evident by these opening verses in the Old Testament book of Ezra.