

Cyrus
May 12, 2013

(Robin Shifflett)

If someone knocked on your door this week and told you that your house would be struck by lightning one week this summer and then crushed by a tornado the next week, would you believe him?

According to National Geographic News website, **the odds of being struck by lightning in your lifetime is 1 in 3,000. The odds of being struck in any one year, in the U.S., is 1 in 700,000.** So it isn't likely that lightning will strike your house this summer.

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/06/0623_040623_lightningfacts.html

The chance of your house being hit by a tornado is even less, once in 250 years, and that is in a high tornado state like Kansas. Kansas averages 49 tornadoes per year. Maryland only averages 4 per year. So the mathematical chances of your house being hit this summer by a tornado are very much less than it being hit by lightning.

Would you believe the prophecy about the tornado if your house was struck by lightning? I hope you would. If the first prediction came true, I hope you would take VERY seriously the second one and prepare for it.

Now I did all that to highlight the idea of two prophecies coming true, especially the second one after the unlikely reality of the first one. Remember, we are speaking of two predictions, and what you would do if the first one came true.

I want to read with you one of my favorite Bible passages. When I read this passage it brings a smile to my face and joy to my heart. I praise God for what I read there. I hope that after today, every time you read this passage you will smile too.

This passage is good news to those who wonder if Yahweh^{*}, the God of the Bible, is trustworthy. We see in this one verse the power of God, the knowledge of God, the mercy and faithfulness of God. Look at it this wonderful passage with me.

Ezra 1:1 (NIV) In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of Yahweh spoken by Jeremiah, Yahweh moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

Now if you are not familiar with this passage, you probably failed to see the mercy and faithfulness of God in it. But that is because you do not know the backstory. It is the backstory, the events leading up to this passage that fills this passage with great meaning.

Ezra mentions the prophet Jeremiah. And we'll look, in a moment, at what Jeremiah had to say. But first we need to go back even further in history, to the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry spanned four different kings. While the Bible does not tell us when or how he died, Jewish tradition says that the evil King Manasseh had Isaiah

stuffed into a hollow log and sawed in half. This may be who is alluded to in Hebrews 11:37, where we read a list of people who had great faith in God.

Hebrews 11:37 (NIV)

They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword.

Isaiah came on the scene as a prophet toward the end of the reign of Uzziah, King of Judah. Uzziah's reign ended in 742 B.C. Following Uzziah were the kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. King Manasseh followed Hezekiah and came to power in 686 B.C. This means Isaiah's ministry lasted a bit over 60 years. And his prophecies hit on a lot of different subjects.

What we are concerned with this morning are two very specific prophecies of future events. Isaiah announced that the Babylonians would be used by God to punish the unfaithful Jewish nation of Judah. The Babylonians would capture and destroy the city of Jerusalem. They would then carry the people of the land off to Babylon, into exile.

Isaiah 39:5-7 (NIV) Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of Yahweh, the all powerful: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says Yahweh.

And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

However, there would be a future king who would, at God's moving, allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

Isaiah 44:24, 26, 28 (NIV) "This is what Yahweh says...

... who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'

... who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."'

Now when Isaiah proclaimed these words, he did so in the city of Jerusalem. He did so in a city that still existed, that had NOT been destroyed, whose people had NOT been carried off, and were not being threatened by the Babylonians. Many of the people who heard what Isaiah said, simply laughed at him. They did not take his words to be the words of Yahweh, the God of Israel. They did not accept Isaiah as a prophet sent by Yahweh.

But in the year **605 B.C.**, long after Isaiah and his generation were dead, **Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and some people are taken to Babylon.** Among them is the young man known as Daniel. Yes, he is that famous Daniel of the lions' den. Babylon leaves the Jewish king on the throne to collect tribute taxes and send them to Babylon every year. This king rebelled and Babylon had to retake the city. This pattern repeated for two more kings, and the Babylonians put an end to it. In **589 B.C.** **Jerusalem is once again captured and this time is burned and destroyed and the inhabitants of Judah are carried into exile to Babylon.**

Isaiah's prophecy came true. This is most significant because it proves that Isaiah was a prophet sent by God. Under the Old Testament Law, God told Moses how to distinguish a true prophet from Yahweh from a false one.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22 (NIV) You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by Yahweh?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of Yahweh does not take place or come true, that is a message Yahweh has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

Thus when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and carried the people into exile that proved Isaiah as a true prophet from Yahweh. It also meant that what he prophesied about a king named Cyrus would come true. This gave some of God's people hope, even in their exile, especially when combined with what Jeremiah the prophet said about the return. Remember Ezra wrote of Jeremiah's prediction.

Jeremiah 29:10-14 (NIV) This is what Yahweh says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares Yahweh, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares Yahweh, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares Yahweh, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Well guess what? In the year **539 B.C., the king of Persia took control of Babylon.** And guess what the name of the king of the Persians was? Cyrus.

When God's people, those who were paying attention, and were remembering in their prayers the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, when they heard that the Persian king's name was Cyrus, surely it brought a smile to their faces. Surely it brought joy to their hearts. They renewed their faith in their God, Yahweh, the one and only, maker of heaven and earth, the one, true, living God. It gave them great hope in the promises Yahweh made to them of their future, including the coming of the Messiah.

The history of Israel was about to turn a corner. This would be a great transition point in the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh.

In the year 537 BC Cyrus frees the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. That is what is recorded in Ezra 1. Let's go back to that passage.

Ezra 1:1-4 (NIV) In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of Yahweh spoken by Jeremiah, Yahweh moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.

Anyone of his people among you--may his God be with him, and let him go up to

Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.

And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."

Wow! We don't know how God revealed Himself and His will to Cyrus. We only know that He did.

Cyrus gave Yahweh glory over his own god. Like all the other nations, Cyrus had trusted in his own gods to fight for him in battle. The Persian empire was the largest of ancient empires. What pride Cyrus should have in himself, his armies, and his gods. Instead,... he publicly recognizes Yahweh as The God of heaven. He says that Yahweh has brought him to such success. What an unbelievably humble thing for such a man to do.

So what does all this mean for us? **This history reminds us that God is in control of this planet.** If God wants something done, He can get even non-believers to do it. We bemoan the lost influence of the Christian church in America. But God hasn't lost any of HIS influence. History is still working toward His intended outcome. His plans are being accomplished.

Here we see the power of God to achieve His plans. Here we see the knowledge of God, even of the future. Here we see God's mercy to redeem and restore His people. Here we see the faithfulness of God to keep His promises. That's what this ancient event means for us.

We should read this and reassert our faith in God. We should restore our flagging hope in His promises. We are assured by this that there is no problem in our lives that God cannot work His will through. Whatever God purposes for your life, He can accomplish it. And He will.

As the old hymn goes, "Have faith in God. He cannot fail. Have faith in God. He will prevail." There is nothing God cannot do.

God is already working in history regarding our future. He has not promised all of your dreams will come true. But all of His dreams will come true. And all of His dreams include good for you. So to that extent, while you may not get all you want, He WILL fulfill His plans for you.

IF He is going to provide you with a mate, He is already working on that. He is making provision for your education, your career, your job, your retirement. He already knows about your next illness, layoff, relocation, or death in your family. Through all of these things He is working out your holiness. He is working out your purity. He is working out your transformation into the character of Jesus. He is working out your full devotion to Him.

Just as God has already worked in the past to provide you with a Savior, so He is working on your future, to keep all of His promises to you. And nothing, nothing will prevent God from doing so. Not the gridlock in Washington. Not the energy problems,

not the pollution problems, not the immigration situation, or the hackers or terrorists, not the recession, depression, or an economic meltdown. Nothing will keep God from fulfilling His promises to you. He was at work in your life before you were born. He is working in your life today. And He is already at work on your future. Renew your faith in Him.

This history reminds us what kind of god Yahweh is. He is a kind God, a merciful God, a forgiving God, a reconciling God, a redeeming God, a faithful God, a saving God. This is demonstrated in the coming of Jesus. Yahweh is a saving God. That is why He sent us His son,... to save us.

1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV) Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...

Yahweh is a saving God. It is Yahweh's nature to behave in this way. And we can count on this nature. We can count on Him continuing, always, to act this way towards His people.

So whatever you have sinned against God, or against others, return to God today. Return for mercy and forgiveness, coming to Him by faith in the Savior He sent you. Jesus is the bridge that will support you as you return to God. Put your faith in Jesus today.

And God has promised that Jesus will return and gather us to Himself. He will forgive sin. He will provide eternal life. He is even now preparing a place for us.

Have you been doubting God's faithfulness? Have you been doubting God's power, or His knowledge? Then read Ezra 1 and believe. The same God who moved a heathen king to do His Yahweh's bidding, that same God loves you. That same God is in control of the world. That same God provided a Savior. That same God will not leave you or desert you. That same God will keep all of His promises to you.

Return to Him today, by faith in the Savior, Jesus, who He has sent to save you.

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***NOTE:** The God of Israel is named Yahweh (not Allah, Vishnu, Baal, Isis, Zeus, etc.). Unfortunately, most English translations of the Bible fail to use God's name. Instead, they use the word LORD written in all caps. Read the Introduction in your Bible and it will mention this. It seems to me that since God told Israel His personal name, He expected them to use it, which they did. It appears thousands of times in the Old Testament. God speaks it, His prophets speak it, and often regular people speak it. We must use it respectfully, but as His people we should use it, at the very least when we read the Bible, putting it where it originally appeared in the Hebrew of the Old Testament.