

# **BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS**

## **Ezra Nehemiah Esther**

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*People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).*

### **Ezra**

#### Chapter One

### **"Stirred, Not Shaken"**

#### Introduction

When you think of Jews held in captivity, traumatic images of Egypt before Moses and Auschwitz under Hitler come immediately to mind. Thus, when bible commentators refer to their 70-year Babylonian captivity in the sixth century, there is a tendency to put it in that same category.

For sure, it began horribly – with King Nebuchadnezzar attacking Jerusalem, destroying their Temple, killing many, and carrying off many more. But by all historical accounts, the Jews built a prosperous, thriving society while in Babylon. They engaged in successful commercial enterprise; they established secure homes and happy families.

At least outwardly, you would not look upon them in Babylon and think that they were people who needed to rebuild their lives. It appeared as if they had already rebuilt them.

There's a point of contact between the Jews in their Babylonian captivity and you and I as believers. In one of his letters, the apostle Peter greets what he calls [the church that is at Babylon](#) (First Peter 5:13). Bible scholars are mostly in agreement that he used the name [Babylon](#) as a synonym for the entire world. In other words, whatever city a believer finds him- or herself in, that city is a spiritual [Babylon](#). It is pagan; it is evil; it is oppressive.

**You and I live in spiritual Babylon.** We are held captive here. For the most part, we are prospering and thriving. We engage in

commerce and further our careers; we establish our homes and families.

At least outwardly, we may not seem as though we are people who need to rebuild our lives. But we might be; and we probably are.

God wanted to rebuild the lives of His sixth century people. He wants to rebuild our lives, His twenty-first century people. The first thing He did *then* is the first thing He'll do *now*. You see it twice in our text:

1. In verse one you're told God **stirred up the spirit...**
2. In verse five the same Hebrew words are translated **whose spirits God had moved.**

God wants to rebuild you as a Christian... To rebuild us as a Church. He starts by stirring up our spirits. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 God Stirs You Up & You Return To Worship, and #2 God Stirs You Up & You Respond With Worship.

#### #1 God Stirs You Up & You Return To Worship (v1-4)

The Jews were under the rule of the Medo-Persian Empire that had defeated Babylon. The historical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther tell the history of Israel after the Babylonian captivity; the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written during this same period of time. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tells the history of the remnant that returned to the land to repair and rebuild the city, its walls, and the Temple. The book of Esther tells the history of those who remained behind, who chose to not return to the land. The events recorded in Esther occur roughly between chapters six and seven of Ezra.

There were a series of three returns to Jerusalem. Chapters one through six of Ezra describe the first return, led by Sheshbazzar, in 538BC. Chapters seven through ten describe the second return, led by Ezra, in 458BC. The book of Nehemiah records a third group that returned, led by Nehemiah, in 444BC.

It all began with God stirring up an unbeliever:

Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, 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, saying,

God had commanded His people to let the land lie fallow every seventh year. They had refused. Four-hundred ninety years went by, during which they ought to have observed seventy such Sabbaths. God raised-up King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to take the Jews away captive and allow their land to have its rest.

God told all this to Jeremiah, who recorded it in the book bearing his name. Although captive, they had the comfort of Bible prophecy – knowing God was at work.

How did God **stir up** Cyrus king of Persia? In another remarkable prophecy, Cyrus is mentioned by name. It's found in Isaiah 44:28, which says,

Isaiah 44:28 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."*'

Isaiah received and wrote those words more than one hundred-fifty years before Cyrus was king of Persia! A first century historian, Josephus, records that Cyrus was shown these words from Isaiah. Many believe it was Daniel who showed them to him. Before he was even born, God had called him by name; it blew his mind!

One way that someone is stirred up is through prophecy. This can be especially true of unbelievers. I know it was Bible prophecy that stirred up my spirit to seek the Lord and be saved.

Ezra 1:2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia:  
All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which *is* in Judah.

It was pretty cool for a pagan king to credit God with working behind the scenes of human history. No matter how insane the world scene gets, God will accomplish His eternal purposes. Most Bible prophecy has already been fulfilled. The rest will be.

God was using Cyrus to stir up His people. He wasn't using a prophet; or a miracle; or any of the more normal means we might expect.

God can use just about anything to stir us up. He used Hurricane Katrina, didn't He? I'm not saying God caused the disaster, or brought it as a judgment. But in its aftermath many of His people have been stirred up to action.

When God stirs you up, you either **go**, or you **give**:

Ezra 1:3 *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 LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.*

Ezra 1:4 *And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.*

Some needed to go. There was work to be done on the site. Others needed to give. There were supplies and support that those who went needed in order to accomplish their task.

Whenever God is moving, He stirs up His people. Some go; others give. It's one or the other!

Going and giving are your decision; you are free to do either, or neither. It's a matter of your free will. But if God is moving, don't you want to be a part of it? Of course you do.

However God stirs us; whoever or whatever He uses; the result of it will be a return to worship. He was stirring up His people to rebuild their Temple, which was a return to worship. It involved work; it required going and giving. But it was for the purpose of worshipping God.

Believers who live in Babylon tend to get comfortable. We build houses and homes and careers. We build Churches. But we sometimes drift away from worship. By *worship* I mean many things: personal devotions... Church attendance... serving others... giving to the work of God.

The point is this: Believers living relatively comfortably in Babylon often need to do some spiritual rebuilding. It begins when God uses someone or something to stir us up to a return to worship in an area of our lives that has been ignored or abandoned. It will mean something different for each of us. Maybe it's getting up earlier, or staying up later, like we used to, spending time with the Lord. Or committing to reading the Bible more... Or memorizing Scripture.

How wonderful of the Lord to stir us up. He sees how easily we are distracted by the smoke-and-mirrors of Babylon. He encourages us to return to what is real; what will last; what really matters – our intimate, personal relationship with Him.

## #2 God Stirs You Up & You Respond With Worship (v5-11)

God's sixth-century people responded enthusiastically to His stirring:

Ezra 1:5 Then the heads of the fathers' *houses* of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which *is* in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:6 And all those who *were* around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all *that* was willingly offered.

The Jews in Babylon were mostly from the Southern Kingdom and that's why they were from the two tribes mentioned, **Judah** and **Benjamin**. **Priests** and **Levites** are noted. We'll see everyone who returned when we study Chapter Two.

**Priests** and **Levites** are mentioned to remind us that it was to return to worship that God was stirring up His people. You'd need these guys to carry out the daily functions of Temple life.

Again you see that some were stirred up to go, while others were stirred up to give. These two groups strengthened one another. Those who stayed behind were strengthened by the courage of the brethren who went; those who went were strengthened by their brethren who gave support.

Even though not everyone was stirred up to go, they were all stirred up to do something. If you're not called to *go*, then you are called to *give*. We are in this together. Whatever we do as a fellowship, you are a part of it. *Staying* behind is not *straying* behind! Give willingly to the ministry, as the Lord puts it upon your heart to do so.

Ezra 1:7 King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods;

Ezra 1:8 and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

Ezra 1:9 This *is* the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives,

Ezra 1:10 thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar *kind*, and one thousand other articles.

Ezra 1:11 All the articles of gold and silver *were* five thousand four hundred.

All *these* Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Cyrus had a rather tolerant policy towards religion. He allowed conquered peoples to worship their own gods in their own way.

Bible commentators are split over just who was **Sheshbazzar**. Some believe it is a Babylonian name for Zerubbabel, while others believe they are two different guys. I'm inclined to believe they were two individuals.

When a foreign king conquered a people, he raided their Temple and took their idols to show that his gods were stronger than their gods. There were no idols in the Temple at Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar had taken whatever he could get his hands on as spoils. These items were now returned.

The articles themselves are not the point. The point is that they were being put back in place, put back where they belonged. They would again be used in worship, rather than simply being on display.

One of the many New Testament descriptions of believers is that we are vessels in a great house:

2 Timothy 2:20 But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.

2 Timothy 2:21 Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

I need to explain these verses a little more. The Church on earth is the **great house**; all those who attend are **vessels**. Some in it are saved; they are **vessels... for honor**, while some are not saved; they are **vessels... for dishonor**. Those who **cleanses themselves from the latter** is a word to the members to not follow false teachers. Stay with the truth and prove that you are a true believer, **useful for the Master, prepared for every good work**.

The point we're emphasizing is that you and I are vessels in God's house on earth, the Church.

The Temple vessels were in Babylon. They had been on display as trophies of the enemy's victory over God's people. Believers who backslide would be one example of this. They are God's precious vessels, but while they sin they are on display as trophies for the enemy.

Maybe you're not backslidden in the traditional sense. But you are in Babylon. It is good to examine yourself. Are you where you belong in your walk with Jesus? Do you need to be put back in place?

It's too easy to get caught-up in Babylonian life. Every now and then we need to be stirred up by God.

We made some suggestions earlier about returning to worship. Responding with worship means not only that we return, but that we do so with enthusiasm and rejoicing. The stirring of our spirits is not meant to be a grudging duty but a gracious desire. It's not that we *have to* get up early, or stay up late; it's that we *get to!* It's not that we *have to* go to Church, or give to the ministry; it's that we *get to*.

Whenever you are in a "have-to" mode, you're too much in Babylon. You need to do some rebuilding until you respond to God's stirrings in a "get-to" mode!

## Applying the Word

Worship is a big concept. It means many things to many people. It means everything from us singing to the Lord as a group, to our individual lifestyle choices.

Maybe we can think of it in terms of expressing love to the Lord for what He's done, and for who He is.

A return to worship, then, is a return to my first love for Jesus. I respond with worship by allowing that first love to motivate all my desires and decisions; and to permeate all of my activities.

If you are not a Christian... God loves you so much that He sent Jesus to save you. Make no mistake about it: You need saving! Your sin separates you from God. But God can forgive you your sin by grace through faith in Jesus.



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