



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 1:1-11

Topic

God moves both King Cyrus of Persia
and the Israelites in exile to build
a second Temple in Jerusalem

Title

“Something in the Way He Moves”

Here are the Top Three New Year’s resolutions
for 2019:

1. 71% of Americans surveyed resolved to diet
or eat healthier.
2. 65% resolved to exercise more.
3. 54% want to lose weight.

I’m good with those; “Let’s make America
healthy again.”

Whether you made a resolution or two, if you are in Christ you probably have some inclination to be more ‘spiritual’ in 2019 - whatever that means for you.

That’s good; I have no criticism.

But I will say this: For a believer, it might not be so much about making a *resolution* for the future as it is about making a *return* to your past.

The New Testament church in Ephesus substantiates my point. They were solid. Jesus commended them in a letter He dictated in the Revelation, saying, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (2:2-3).

Those are fantastic spiritual accomplishments. I can see the believers in other churches resolving to, in the future, be as spiritual as their Ephesian brothers and sisters.

That's not all Jesus said:

Revelation 2:4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Revelation 2:5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent.

While their works were good, what they really needed was to make a *return* to a former spiritual plateau that they had regressed from.

Do you need to make a return? Do I? It's a great question to ask as we head into 2019.

We can answer it by taking a look at the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. They tell the tale of Israel's return to Jerusalem after seventy years of exile in Babylon.

As the Israelites were getting back to where *they* once belonged, we will be able to see if *we* need to return to a spiritual place we have left.

I'll organize my comments about chapter one around two points: #1 You See What It Is Like To Be Moved By The Word Of God, and #2 You See What It Is Like To Be Moved In Your Worship Of God.

#1 You See What It Is Like To Be Moved By The Word Of God

(v1-4)

While we want to glean personal, devotional insights for our own walk with the Lord, we also want to read and understand these books in their original, historical context.

I say “books,” but I should tell you that many Jewish scholars consider Ezra and Nehemiah to be one book. It's not a big deal; file it away under “interesting Bible facts.”

We're picking-up the story in the sixth century BC. Because of their disobedience, God had disciplined His people by raising-up King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and sending him against Jerusalem.

In a series of three invasions, the Babylonians defeated the Jews, and destroyed their Temple, and carried them away as captives.

Enter King Cyrus of Persia, *a.k.a.*, Cyrus the Great. He defeated the Medes, and his empire became known to history as Medo-Persia. Cyrus then easily defeated Babylon, taking the city without a fight.

The Jews in Babylon found themselves under a new government; a tolerant government. In fact, Cyrus issued a decree so the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild.

Several Old Testament books are involved:

1. The historical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther tell the history of Israel's return under Medo-Persian rule.
2. The prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written during this same period of time.
3. 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.

4. 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:

1. Chapters one through six of Ezra describe the first return, led by Sheshbazzar, in 538_{BC}.
2. Chapters seven through ten describe the second return, led by Ezra, in 458_{BC}.
3. The Book of Nehemiah records a third group that returned, led by Nehemiah, in 444_{BC}.

It all takes place over about one hundred years. It all began, oddly enough, with God moving the spirit of a nonbeliever:

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. Thus the length of their domination by Babylon lasted seventy years.

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

- They knew, or they ought to have known, the exact length of their punishment.
- They were promised a return to their land.
- They were told that their Temple would be rebuilt.

The NKJV says “the Lord stirred up the **spirit** of Cyrus.” Other versions say God “moved” on him. The word has the connotation of being *awakened or aroused; of opening the eyes* to something.

How did God move King Cyrus of Persia? In a remarkable prophecy, *Cyrus was 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. It isn't far fetched to believe it was Daniel who showed them to him.

Before he was even born, the God of Israel had called Cyrus by name; **it blew his mind**.

I don't need to tell you that Bible prophecy is able to move people. I was saved as a direct result of being moved by a movie highlighting the prophecies in the Revelation.

Prophecy promotes a readiness that will help keep you from regressing in your walk. And it can certainly inspire you to return to a previous spiritual place - especially in knowing the Lord's return is imminent.

Plus - look at its effect on the nonbelieving Cyrus. Sure, he was named by Isaiah. But the Word has power to open nonbeliever's eyes to see that the sinner in need of salvation is them. The Holy Spirit convicts them - just as if they were being named on the pages of the Bible.

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.

The "proclamation" of Cyrus is dated at 538^{BC}. It was pretty cool for a pagan king to credit God with working behind the scenes of human history. I need to tell you, however, that Cyrus was not saved. He acknowledged many 'god's,' and thought of Yahweh as one of them.

God moved the spirit of a pagan king to accomplish His eternal purposes. Theologians call this “providence,” which is defined as, “that continuous activity of God whereby He makes all the events of the physical, mental, and moral phenomena work out His purposes; and that this purpose is nothing short of the original design of God in creation.”

As a footnote, I would add that we do not teach God’s meticulous predetermination, but that in His true Sovereignty, He is able to allow for man’s free will and still accomplish His original design.

With regard to providence and free will, we discover each of the following three things in the Bible:

1. God sometimes allows man to do as he pleases.
2. God sometimes keeps a man from doing what in his freedom he would otherwise do.
3. God always overrules what man does to accomplish His own ends.

God was moving on the spirits of His people as well.

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.

Two words describe the reaction of those moved: Go, and Give.

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

Going and giving are definitely signs God has moved you.

It might be helpful to know that, after seventy years, though they were captive, the Jews were comfortable, and prosperous, in their exile. They weren't slaves; they were savvy businessmen.

Believers tend to get comfortable in the world, and with worldliness. We build houses and homes and careers. That's OK, but it can lead to a spiritual drowsiness, or slumber, that we need to be aroused from.

I mentioned that Haggai prophesied during this period. He uttered the famous rebuke, used by countless churches to guilt believers into donating to the building fund: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" (1:4).

Going and giving are your decision; you are free to do either, or neither. It's a matter of your free will.

- Are you giving? The New Testament teaching on giving is that it should be willing, regular, sacrificial, and joyous. **Yours either is; or it isn't.**
- Are you going? In our case, we'd understand that as being a part of building the local church by your serving as one of its members. **You either are; or you're not.**

Going and giving - it's definitely possible to regress from them and therefore need to return.

#2 You See What It Is Like To Be Moved In Your Worship Of God

(v5-11)

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

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 of Judah, from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

(After King Solomon died, Israel split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, called Israel, and its ten tribes had long before been overrun by the Assyrian Empire as a discipline for their sin).

Priests and Levites are specifically 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.

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.

As I mentioned, Cyrus had a tolerant policy towards religion. He allowed conquered peoples to worship their own gods in their own way. He would ask his subjects to call upon their gods to give him favor, and to strengthen the gods of Medo-Persia.

Bible commentators are split over the identity of Sheshbazzar. Some believe it is a Babylonian name for Zerubbabel, while others believe they are two different guys. Zerubbabel will become prominent as the leader of the first return. In fact, the Second Temple that is built is commonly called Zerubbabel's Temple. 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.

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.

The articles themselves are not the point. The point is that they were being *returned*, put back where to where they belonged. They would again be used in worship, rather than simply being on display, or used for secular purposes.

The Israelites returned the “articles of worship.” In the KJV, they are called the “**vessels** of worship.”

That gives us a point of contact. **We** are compared to “vessels” in the New Testament - notably in Second Corinthians where Paul says we have God’s “treasure in earthen vessels.”

What are the signs we, as God's vessels, have returned to worship?

The Temple vessels were carefully identified and inventoried. It reminds us that, on the most basic level, you must be certain you are in Christ - a Christian - who is indeed a member of Jesus Christ's Temple on the earth.

The Temple vessels would be used only for sacred, never secular, purposes. This speaks to us of our need to remain separated from the world, and worldliness.

In Second Timothy 2:20-21 we read, "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. 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."

Vessels of honor are those that remain separated. As it is often summarized, "we must be *in* the world, but not *of* the world."

The verses about vessels in Second Timothy remind us that, like the Temple vessels, we are to fulfill our function. We are to find our purpose - our spiritual purpose.

It's exactly the same idea illustrated by our being a body - Jesus' body - one the earth. Each member has its place, has our purpose. You read about it in a long passage in First Corinthians 12.

Staying with our vessel illustration - Do you know if you are a platter? Or a knife? Or a basin?

The church is an every-member ministry. You're enjoined to discover your place in the local church. God has before ordained you to good works, but you are to pursue them, not simply remain passive.

Here, then, are three more questions you can reflect upon:

1. Are you saved?
2. Are you remaining separated?

3. Are you serving the Lord's earthly Temple, the church?

This dovetails nicely into last Sunday's message. We discussed the passage in Second Corinthians chapter four that contains the verse, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (v7).

If you missed that message, I highly recommend you read it, or watch it. It expands on the understanding that we live in the very unique church age - that mystery Paul revealed that takes place between the Day of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts, and the return of Jesus to resurrect the dead in Christ and rapture those of us who are alive and remain.

The apostle Paul has said in Second Corinthians 4:10, we carry, "about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." In his letter to the Colossians he wrote something similar, saying that we "fill up in [our] flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

Here is what those verses tell us about the church age in which we live: Jesus is in Heaven, but we remain on earth and, as His body, it's as if He never left. Men still afflict Him through us, and in that way we carry about His dying, and "fill up," or complete, His afflictions.

The church age is an era, a dispensation, in which we, as His vessels, will find ourselves being broken - suffering afflictions - in order for God's treasure to be revealed as we walk in His resurrection power.

This understanding of the era we are in is foundational to everything else we've said today. For one thing, if you aren't ready for suffering, if you don't think it's normal, you'll be derailed in your journey with Jesus. You'll quit asking the questions we've suggested, and instead waste a lot of time asking "Why me?"

We shouldn't think of being moved by God as something we are totally passive about. **He is always moving on our hearts and minds.**

Are part is to be moved; and these questions are a start:

1. Am I saved?
2. Am I separated?
3. Am I serving?
4. Am I going?
5. Am I giving?