Fulfilling the Word of the Lord

Ezra 1

 Well, it had been a long time coming, but God’s people could finally see some justice being done. Back in 597 BC, the Babylonian army had conquered the Kingdom of Judah, and captured the city of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had stolen all the treasures from the Temple. And if that wasn’t enough, he had carried off Jehoiachin, King of Judah, along with some 10,000 men of Jerusalem into exile in Babylon, along with untold women and children.

 But that wasn’t the worst of it. Some eleven years later, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem, and once again laid siege to it, this time for about a year and a half. After the city fell, most of the rest of the people were carried off into exile, and most of the city was destroyed. The Temple of God was also burned and leveled, leaving God’s people without any way of performing the sacrifices that the Law prescribed for the forgiveness of their sins. The Babylonians had left the people of God without independence, without a home of their own, and without one of their most important ways to access God’s grace.

 But what a difference a new king could make! In 539 BC, the Babylonian conquerors found themselves conquered, this time by Cyrus, King of Persia. And this new king quickly set to work overturning his predecessors’ policies. The Babylonians had believed in transporting their captive peoples to new places and destroying their places of worship. But Cyrus understood that the best way to govern a vast and diverse empire was to allow a great amount of freedom to the people, at least where religion was concerned. And so the people of God heard the best news they could possibly receive – they would be allowed to return home. They would be allowed to rebuild their temple.

And Cyrus went so far as to locate all the precious objects the Babylonians had stolen from the Temple that they had destroyed so many years before – the platters, the basins and other things made from silver and gold, items that were hundreds of years old. And he returned these things to the people who were returning to Jerusalem.

Yes, the people of God had lots of reasons to rejoice over their new king, who was doing a lot of things that they liked. And like them, we might be tempted to place our hopes in the changes that a new President or Governor can make. But today’s passage shows us that it is unwise to put too much stock in any human ruler, however good or bad he might seem. For at the end of the day, no matter who might be ruling and reigning in Israel or Babylon or Persia, or the United States for that matter, the Lord is really the One Who is in control.

Just look at how this passage begins. It turns out that everything Cyrus did was actually just a fulfillment of what the Lord had told Jeremiah, who lived and prophesied in the years before Jerusalem was destroyed. This is what God told the people would happen in chapter 25 of Jeremiah’s prophecy, well before any of these things came to pass:

8 "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words,

 9 behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.

 10 Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp.

 11 This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

 12 Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste.

 13 I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.

14 For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands." (Jer. 25:8-14 ESV)

Now, just think about that. God told Jeremiah that Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Judah, and he did. And then God said that the Babylonians themselves would be conquered, and they were. But God wasn’t just claiming to know what was going to happen – no, He said He would cause all these things to come to pass. God said, “I will send for all the tribes of the north. I will bring them against this land. I will devote them to destruction.” And then, “I will punish the king of Babylon. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it. I will recompense them according to their deeds.” Jeremiah testified that God was in complete control of everything that would happen to His people, from first to last.

But Jeremiah wasn’t the only one who predicted the judgment that would come upon the Babylonians. Isaiah chapter 44:28 was even more specific, going so far as to name Cyrus as the one who would restore the city and the Temple. Isaiah said that God is the One “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.”’”

But again, Isaiah makes it plain that Cyrus is only the instrument God uses to accomplish His will. He goes on in chapter 45 to say that God is the One Who would subdue all those nations before Cyrus. God says, “I have raised him up in righteousness, And I will direct all his ways; He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, Not for price nor reward.” And our passage from Ezra also makes the same point – look at the very first verse. It says the Lord “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” to do all the things God wanted him to do.

So, whether our human rulers do things that give us reasons for hope or despair, we need to remember Who’s really in charge. For what did God tell Isaiah? “I am the Lord, who makes all things, Who stretches out the heavens all alone, Who spreads abroad the earth by Myself.” “I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things.” The amazing truth is that Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus were both simply instruments of God’s will.

And no, it doesn’t matter whether a particular human king believes all this or not. We have no reason to believe that Nebuchadnezzar had a conversion experience before he chose to invade Judah and destroy Jerusalem – he just thought he was acting in his self-interest. In the same way, we know that Cyrus wasn’t of Jewish descent, and there’s no record of his conversion. On the contrary, Isaiah spoke this word of God to Cyrus even before he was born: “I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. 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.” In other words, Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus were both pagan kings. They did not know God, and yet God used them to accomplish His will.

But even though he wasn’t a believer, Cyrus nevertheless testified to God’s sovereign power, didn’t he? Oh, he was probably just trying to be politically correct. He probably just wanted all the peoples of his empire to pray to their gods for him. But look at the language he uses in verse 2 – he says that all the kingdoms of the earth were given to him by the Lord, the God of the heavens. And he says that God is the One Who commanded him to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. And did you notice that the word, “Lord,” is in all caps? That means Cyrus is using God’s covenant name, Yahweh, just to make sure that everyone knew he was talking about the God of the Jews.

And so we see just how absolute God’s authority and power really are. God used Nebuchadnezzar and then Cyrus to do what He wanted them to do. And God even put His own praises in Cyrus’ mouth, using the lips of a pagan king to teach His people the truth about Himself.

But Cyrus wasn’t the only person whose spirit God stirred up in this way, was he? Look at verse 5. The heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and many of the priests and the Levites decided to make the trip back to Jerusalem because God raised, God stirred up their spirits too – the Hebrew text uses the same verb to emphasize that God was doing the same thing among them that He had done to Cyrus.

Now, I know our news media has given our new President wall-to-wall coverage this week, and he is doing a lot of newsworthy things. Some people really like what he’s doing, and others are so upset that they are rioting in the streets. But does it really make sense to put all that much stress on which human being happens to be in charge in any given moment? After all, if the Lord is the God of Heaven, if the Lord is the One Who stirs up the hearts even of pagan kings to accomplish His will, and if the Lord is the One Who draws His people’s hearts to obey Him, shouldn’t we give God all the glory? Regardless of who pulls the levers of power on earth, isn’t God really the One Who deserves the praise for His perfect justice and His abundant mercy?

Ah, but how do we glorify this sovereign God? How do we respond to the truth of His almighty power? Well, what did Cyrus tell the people to do? In verse 3, he told the people of God to go up to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. And if there were any who could not or would not go, Cyrus said that they should support the rebuilding effort with their gifts.

And that’s exactly what God’s people did. Those whose hearts were stirred made plans for the long journey. But those who stayed behind gave offerings so that the travelers’ journey, and their new life in the land of Israel would be possible.

In other words, when faced with the incontrovertible evidence of the sovereignty of their God, the people of God did not lapse into complacency. They did not sit back and wait for God to do everything. No, they celebrated their God’s power and acknowledged His control by seeking to obey Him. They gave of their substance and of themselves so that He might accomplish His will through them.

So in our own time of political change and turmoil, we can learn a lot from those Ancient Hebrews, can’t we? No matter what happens in our own county or in Jackson or in Washington, let’s remember who’s really in charge. But let’s worship and submit ourselves to our Lord and King as we surrender more of ourselves to Him everyday, doing what He commands us so that He may receive all the honor and glory.