

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2020
EZRA 1 – WHO’S IN CHARGE?**

Who’s in charge? Have you ever been in the situation where you have wondered that? Perhaps when you wondered it, you even spoke those words out loud. I know that I have had a few experiences where I have wondered who called the shots. Some eating establishments seemed to be so chaotic, you wonder where the managers are and what they were doing. Schools, businesses, churches, all can experience times of uncertainty...from lack of leadership to too many people assuming the mantle of chief cook and bottle washer.

A lack of leadership can be an unsettling feeling, especially if you rely on the leadership for your livelihood or something necessary. Today, we start a new series in the Old Testament that looks at the issue of “Who is in charge!”

Over the next weeks we are going to be looking at a unit of writing in the Old Testament that I am guessing is not very well known by the average church goer. We will dive into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. I called it a unit because in the ancient Jewish scriptures it was one book and is best understood as one story.

Let’s begin by reading the first chapter of Ezra:

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah, He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom:

2 “This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in

Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! ⁴ Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.”

⁵ Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the LORD. ⁶ And all their neighbors assisted by giving them articles of silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock. They gave them many valuable gifts in addition to all the voluntary offerings.

⁷ King Cyrus himself brought out the articles that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the LORD’s Temple in Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his own gods. ⁸ Cyrus directed Mithredath, the treasurer of Persia, to count these items and present them to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles returning to Judah. ⁹ This is a list of the items that were returned:

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| <i>gold basins</i> | <i>30</i> |
| <i>silver basins</i> | <i>1,000</i> |
| <i>silver incense burners</i> | <i>29</i> |
| <i>¹⁰ gold bowls</i> | <i>30</i> |
| <i>silver bowls</i> | <i>410</i> |
| <i>other items</i> | <i>1,000</i> |

¹¹ In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. Sheshbazzar brought all of these along when the exiles went from Babylon to Jerusalem.

500 years of Kings for the Children of Israel has ended disastrously! In 587 B.C. Babylon sacks Jerusalem, overthrows the monarchy, and God's people go into captivity. Was the promise to Abraham, the promise that God would make them into a mighty nation...over? Was the dream dead? Where was God and why was this happening to HIS people?

It was not an unusual event in the life of the nation. Early in their history, a great famine saw Jacob and his sons move to Egypt and they ended up staying for about 430 years. At the time of the Moses and the Exodus, a family had become a nation.

Now, the nation was relocated to Babylon, and what was once a mighty people became what we call a remnant. The time of captivity has ended and those who are left might make a really nice church. THIS is where Ezra begins!

The story told in Ezra-Nehemiah covers about 100 years. It is a historic story. There have been amazing archeological discoveries that have show what is written is historically accurate. The discoveries are even more important, because they belong to the Persian kingdom and not from the Children of Israel. It is what we call extra-biblical evidence. Sadly, many Christians skip books like Ezra and Nehemiah. They are often pushed aside as historical stories. As much as they are historical, we must remember that they are all part of a Theological story. They are important in our understanding of who God is and who we are to God. They are part of our identity as we study who God is.

This story is about the sovereignty of God and how God uses the world we live in to accomplish his will, whether those involved know it or not. The story gives us a glimpse of God's plan, set in motion many years before, coming into reality through the seemingly unrelated acts of history.

Our story centers of three main characters. You have Zerubbabel, whom a foreign, pagan king commissions to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel has a supporting cast of Jeshua, the high priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The building stalls and for sixty years we don't hear anything until Ezra shows up in the 6th chapter. Ezra is given the task (by a pagan

emperor) to go to Jerusalem and make sure God's laws are being followed and enforced. The book of Ezra ends on a severe note. The final main character is Nehemiah who tells his own story. He is tasked with rebuilding Jerusalem's wall and all the intrigue, back-stabbing, and politics involved in that task.

Our lesson takes place during the time of Daniel and King Darius, Xerxes, whose Queen was Esther. Worldly events, the rise and fall of many empires...all resulting in the will and promises of God being fulfilled.

GOD'S SOVERIGNTY OVER POLITICS

These past few years politically have been anything but dull especially when we look at the events of the last four years in the USA. It seems that political landscape of our neighbours to the south have brought many emotions to the surface and much of it is expressed in hatred, fear, and anxiety. I am not here advocating one leader or party over another, but I am here to remind the body of Christ that through all the drama, uncertainty, and unrest...God is the one who is sovereign over His creation.

What do we mean when we say God is sovereign?

John Piper sums it up well when he says:

God's sovereignty is his right and power to do all that he decides to do. Job 42:2: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." But notice that nothing in that definition of sovereignty refers to God's wisdom or God's plans. It's just right and power: you have the right and you have the power to do what you decide to do. When he decides to do a thing, he does it, and no one can stop him. That's sovereignty.

How does Ezra teach us about God's sovereignty?

Right off the start we have Cyrus, the king of the Medes and Persians issue a decree in Ezra 1:2-4:

² ***"This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:***

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! ⁴ Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

Let's set the scene to encounter God's sovereignty.

The end of the exile is near and the ruler of the known world and possibly the most powerful person on the planet at the time is Cyrus, leader of the Persian empire. The Persian empire was as vast as it was diverse. It had subdued many countries that all had their own cultures, customs, and religious practices. Rather than force all of these countries to become "Persian," Cyrus encouraged their religious beliefs and often funneled money into their temples and places of worship. Cyrus, being a believer in multiple gods, wanted to make sure his bases were covered and encouraged the other religious to pray to their deities for his success and for the empire.

Cyrus was not a follower of the one true God, but the one true God had a use for Cyrus.

For the history enthusiast, you should read about the how Cyrus rose to power. It is filled with all the intrigue, murder, deception, and violence you would expect. Cyrus made his decision for his purposes not knowing that by doing so he would ultimately fulfill God's purposes.

Verse 5 shows us that it is God who stirred the heart of Cyrus to act and it was God who stirred up the remnant of the faithful in exile to act. Many of the Israelites who were in exile had resigned themselves to their life and actually enjoyed where they were at. They were not slaves in Babylon.

They had established lives and relationships, and many were not keen on the hard work necessary to go a rebuild a life in Jerusalem. God stirred the hearts of those who needed to return to Jerusalem.

God's sovereignty stirred the heart of Cyrus years before to begin his march across nations in conquest. Cyrus thought he was creating an empire, but as Derek Kidner says in his Ezra commentary:

His most significant achievement, against all human reckoning, was not to win an empire but 'to build my city and set my exiles free' (Isa. 45:13).

Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries) (p. 34). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would be instrumental to God. God also was keeping his word to his people. He had promised Judah that the exile would be only seventy years so that the people would have "a future and a hope." In Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10 we read:

¹² "Then, after the seventy years of captivity are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and his people for their sins," says the LORD. "I will make the country of the Babylonians a wasteland forever.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.

FOR US TODAY

When was the last time you thought about the sovereignty of God and how that should apply to your life today? We are in the midst of turbulent, chaotic, uncertain times. People are fearful about what is coming next – disease, disaster, elections, finances...and we often wonder where God is and if He truly in control.

The very beginning of Ezra is another example of why we have a firm foundation to stand on in turbulent times. We need to remind ourselves that what faith is:

Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1).

Ezra reminds us that God is sovereign. God will do what he wants, when he wants, and how he wants. When God acts it is good! We may not be able to see how God is working in our times but we can rest on the fact that he is working. It might be days or it might be years before we see how God has intervened on our behalf.

Are you willing to allow God to be God and patiently wait on his actions? As you do this, ask God to grant you peace in the knowledge that He is sovereign. Rest in the knowledge that you are known and loved by God. Be willing to be obedient to the stirring of your heart when God requests you to act!

May we live the words of Psalm 46:10

***“Be still, and know that I am God!
I will be honored by every nation.
I will be honored throughout the world.”***