

February 16

Scriptures: Read Ezra 1 & 2

Key Verse: "... all those whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:5)

Overview

The book of Ezra is a continuation of Chronicles, and it is probable that they were initially one book. This is evident in that the first two verses of Ezra are the same as the last two verses of 2 Chronicles. King Cyrus of Persia was used by God to bring judgment upon Babylon (Jeremiah 25:12) and restore to the land of their inheritance the faithful remnant, who would rebuild the Lord's House. As archeological finds have proven, Cyrus declared that the people of the various nations whom Babylon had captured and displaced could return to their homelands and practise their own religion; in return, he asked them to pray to their gods for him to have a long life. Though Cyrus was a heathen, God used him to fulfill His plan (cf. Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 2:20-21), and Cyrus had great respect for the God of the Israelites. It is probable that Cyrus had contact with Daniel (cf. Daniel 6:1-3; Darius was Cyrus' father-in-law) and learned of the God of Israel from him. Cyrus may also have been aware of Isaiah's prophecy concerning himself, which had been written 200 years before. In that prophecy, he was named as God's instrument to liberate the exiles and initiate the restoration of the Temple (cf. Isaiah 44:26-28; 45:1, 13).

In fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (1:1), the Exile lasted only seventy years (Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10). This prophecy of Jeremiah stirred Daniel to fervently pray for God's deliverance at the time of Babylon's fall (Daniel 9:2-4). The Lord, through His Spirit, was also working in the hearts of His faithful remnant to stir them to "go up" to Jerusalem and repair His House (1:5; Jerusalem was southward, but due to the elevation of the land, one must go upward to get there). Those faithful few did not bow down to the foreign idols but were anxious to leave the worldly, idolatrous country and separate themselves unto God. They longed to worship Him in the city where He had put His Name, Jerusalem, even though it was desolate and in ruin at that time. Their going was a step of faith, and they had a set purpose: to rebuild the House of the Lord.

The majority of the Israelites did not leave. They were well settled and many had become prosperous, married foreign wives, and raised families. They were, however, able to support and encourage those who did go by giving many gifts and provisions, as well as offerings for the Temple. No doubt many Gentiles also helped. Cyrus himself did his part and set an example by giving them all the many articles of the Temple that had been taken by the Babylonians. He gave them into the trusted hands of "Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah". This may have been the Babylonian name for Zerubbabel, just as Daniel also had been given an official Babylonian name, Belteshazzar (Daniel 1:7). Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin (1 Chronicles 3:17-19; an ancestor of Joseph, Matthew 1:12). Since Israel was no longer allowed kings, Zerubbabel was appointed governor because of his royal ancestry (5:14). He was the undisputed leader of the returned exiles.

Chapter two lists the names of some of those who returned to Israel. Most came from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (priests, singers, and gatekeepers included). However, in later lists

we learn that among those who returned, there was representation from all the tribes. Some of those who went to Jerusalem were non-Israelites. Among these were “Solomon’s servants”, who were likely descendants of his prisoners of war and Canaanites whom he had organized as a labour force in the construction of the Temple; also, there were the Nethinim (meaning “given ones”) who were Temple servants from the descendants of the Gibeonites whom King Solomon organized as a work force to help the Levites (cf. Joshua 9; 1 Kings 9:21; 1 Chronicles 9:2). They had probably been converted to the true worship of God and returned with sincerity and a longing to once again serve Him in Jerusalem.

The importance of accurate genealogical records is evident in the problem that faced three families who claimed to be priests but could show no proof of their ancestry from the line of Aaron. They had to be excluded from the priesthood, because it was not certain that God had chosen and ordained them to serve Him. Similarly, those of us who have been called by God today as a part of His holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) must show evidence that we have indeed been called by Him. Our transformed hearts within must show from without by our “fruit” (Gal. 5:22,23).

Prayer

Lord, because You featured Cyrus in Your plan, we know that You also have a purpose for our political leaders. We pray Your guidance upon them. Move our spirits, O Lord, to be labourers together with Christ in building Your church.