

From Captivity to Restoration: The Transition from 2 Kings to Ezra

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References: 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36:15-16; 2 Chronicles 33:10-13; 2 Kings 21:10; Psalm 51:1-4; Romans 8:32; Revelation 2:5; 1 Kings 19:18; Jeremiah 39:11; 2 Kings 25:27-30; Matthew 5:45; 2 Kings 24:8; Ezra 1:1; Ezra 1:2-4

Introduction: Concluding 2 Kings

All right. So, again, welcome to all, and we're going to turn to 2 Kings chapter 25. Yeah, I think we should—2 Kings 25. And what we have is a question that came in. Actually, it was Amir who asked a good question, and so we're going to begin by analyzing that question in the light of 2 Kings 25 and much of 2 Kings that comes before that. So again, Eric, if you will.

Amir's question is, throughout the book of 2 Kings—and we might include 2 Chronicles as well, 1 and 2 Kings, the history of the kings—God was very patient and sent many warnings through prophets, but judgment still came at the end. We could broaden—we could broaden that out to include the time of the judges when God had to raise up deliverers, when the people of God strayed from His word, strayed from His commandments. And so God would either raise up enemies from outside, He would bring famines, He would sometimes bring plagues of different things. We know that in the wilderness as well, fiery serpents, the Amalekites came, and so on.

These were judgments or chastisements. These were discipline. They weren't judgment in the sense of being condemned; they were judgments to try and bring back the people of God. For disciplinary reasons, God would do that.

The Tension of God's Patience and Justice

Now, in particular, your question, Amir, is kind of framed by the statement in 2 Chronicles chapter 36, verses 15 and 16. This pretty much summarizes the question that you have here. Are you reading verse 15 of chapter 36?

[2 Chronicles 36:15-16 NKJV]

¹⁵ And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers,

rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy.

It wasn't because God was bringing judgment because He hated them. He had compassion on His people, and so He brought these troubles. But their response was that they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words—that is, God's words through the prophets—and they scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord arose against the people, till there was no remedy. The wrath of God against their sin. He still loved His people; He still had compassion on them. But your question was, how should we understand this balance between God's patience and mercy and His justice in this book?

Because we have gone through these books. We've read the history of these kings. This little summary that we have here is a sad story of how the prophets that God sent to warn His people—how the people received that. They rejected it, scoffed, and so on, until there was no remedy. How long, then, will God be merciful? How long will His compassion last till He brings final judgment?

God's Mercy in the Lives of Manasseh and David

Well, that's a good question. We have examples in the Scripture. We have, for example, Manasseh. Manasseh was probably the most wicked king of Israel, and he reigned the longest of any king in the history of Israel. His reign was a long time—55 years, I believe—he reigned in Judah. And he was one of the most wicked kings that had ever been, even worse than some of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. But we read in 2 Chronicles 33 and verse 10 how He dealt with Manasseh.

[2 Chronicles 33:10 NKJV]

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen.

In the parallel passage in the book of Kings, 2 Kings 21, verse 10, says that God spoke through His prophets.

[2 Kings 21:10 NKJV]

And the LORD spoke by His servants the prophets, saying,

To Manasseh. But it says he would not listen. They would not listen, they and the people.

[2 Chronicles 33:11 NKJV]

¹¹ Therefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon.

Now, that's very severe. But it says when he was in affliction, he implored the Lord his God and humbled himself.

[2 Chronicles 33:12-13 NKJV]

¹² Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, ¹³ and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

Amazing! The most wicked king bows humbly before the Lord, God hears him, and restores him to his kingdom.

We think of even a good king like David. We recall the story, the bad story of his sin with Bathsheba—adultery, which is punishable by death under the law. And how when Bathsheba was found to be with a child from this illegal union, David attempts to cover it up by telling Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to come back from the battle that they were fighting against the Ammonites, and to come home so that he could probably then sleep with his wife and David's sin might be then covered up. The child that would be born, Uriah would think that it was his.

But Uriah, the faithful man that he was, he would not go home. As long as the army was in the field, Uriah said, "I will stay at the king's house." So he slept; he didn't go home. None of his other fellow soldiers were able to go home, so he did not as well. So David tried to get him drunk, to no avail.

So finally, David writes a letter. He writes a letter to Joab, the captain or his commander of his army, and puts it into the hand of Uriah himself, and it's his death sentence. The letter goes: "Joab, I want you to put Uriah into the hottest place of the battle." And written between the lines is: "I don't want him to survive." So he engineered the death of Uriah. So he's guilty of adultery, which is punishable by death. He also comes under the hand of the manslayer, which is—he should have been slain for his guilt, his blood guilt.

But instead, God puts His hand upon David day and night, day and night. After much time, probably about a year takes place, when finally Nathan the prophet comes in and points out to David, "You are the man." And David breaks. There's no sacrifice that he could take to the temple; a thousand bulls as a sin offering would not take one sin away. And so what David does, he cries out to the Lord:

[Psalm 51:1-4 NKJV]

- ¹ Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
- ³ For I acknowledge my transgressions,
And my sin is always before me.
- ⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done this evil in Your sight--
That You may be found just when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.

And God forgave his sin through His mercy. So God is a very merciful God. And even wicked actions of this good man, David, and the lifelong wickedness of that king, Manasseh, God heard their humble cry for mercy. He heard them.

There are so many examples in the Scriptures. We think of Jonah, who, the prophet of God, rebelled against the word of God and went the opposite way, would not take the word of God of which he was commanded, but out of the belly of the whale, he prayed to God, and God delivers him and puts him back onto the track and restores him to his ministry. David was restored to his throne, and Manasseh was restored again to his throne.

The Exile and the Remnant

Now, what's the balance, then, is the question that you asked—the balance. And I'm not sure what the balance is. We don't know exactly how long God will wait. We know that as the history of the kings is completed, that finally those last three kings, they would not hear the prophets. And Jeremiah was with them the entire time, and others were with them too, prophesying, pleading with the people. Jeremiah in particular was called the weeping prophet. He wept over Jerusalem. He knew what was going to happen, and he wept. But the people would not turn. So finally, He had the Babylonians come in, and they carried them away from Jerusalem three times.

The first time was kind of a mild thing. Jerusalem was not destroyed, just a few were taken away. And then there was a second time. And then the third time, finally, after all this repeated rebellion, God had to bring the Babylonians in. They built a siege wall, and they took the city, they burned the city, they destroyed the temple, they pulled down the walls, and they completely devastated Jerusalem and carried them away, and left only the poor of the land there for those 70 years of captivity and the 70 years of desolations.

So, the balance. But what was God's purpose in that? It was to rid them of their sin of idolatry, mainly; it was idolatry that was their main sin. Did it accomplish its work? When they came back—when those few that came back, we'll be looking at the book of Ezra and Nehemiah in succession—the people came back, and the Jewish nation never since has been attracted to idols. So that work was accomplished. But there's great suffering.

What is the balance, though, between His mercy and His justice? There it is. I guess to answer that in the fullest sense, you must look at the cross. God was not merciful to His Son, was He?

[Romans 8:32 NKJV]

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

He underwent the wrath of God that the justice of God might be satisfied, so that His mercy could open up to us who are guilty sinners, far from Him. And so, I don't know if there's a balance there.

But there's going to be a time when those that refuse the gospel—I'm not talking about those who have never heard the gospel; I'm talking about those that have heard of the mercy and

grace of God and have refused it, shook their fist in God's face and say, "We won't have this man! We won't have him reign over us! He won't be Lord of my life!"

Where, when is the limit? We don't know because we're living in an age of grace. 2,000 years, the longest dispensation of all of history is this dispensation of the grace of God. 2,000 years and counting, and God still has not come to punish those who killed His Son. And we all—our sin put Him there. We're all guilty before God. So, you know, that's a mystery. I think to completely answer your question, it's a mystery.

But God has demonstrated His mercy through giving us His beloved Son—Him who was just, was killed for us, the unjust, that He might bring us to God. The pleading of God is, "Come, come, come to me." And so, I don't know how I can answer your question entirely, but I do know this: that God's mercy is unlimited, but God's mercy is also a time-bound thing.

But sometime in time, He's going to have to close the door. The door will be closed. We read that in the seven letters to the churches with the warnings that are given them, on the church for this day:

[Revelation 2:5 NKJV]

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.

But, He says, there's a little remnant there, a little remnant of overcomers. Always in every place, there's a little remnant that God has preserved for Himself. But for the rest, they're exposed to God's justice if they refuse His mercy. I don't know how long. Go ahead.

Amir: I didn't think this way you talk about, but I think about it. But maybe I have a further question. I ask next week.

Well, this is a very interesting question, and in some ways difficult to completely answer.

Amir: Yes. I want to understand more and more because just if we read this part of history, I want me to understand more and more the God. And He's willing.

Yeah. Yeah. That's it. His mercy. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His mercy endures forever.

Eric, in his concluding remarks, suggested that there was a remnant. And what we follow in Kings, as we look at the overall history, we see what's going on on the massive collective

level, at the senior government level. But God was also working on multitudes of individuals. You remember Elijah said, "I am the only one remaining. I'm the only prophet of the Lord." The Lord says:

[1 Kings 19:18 NKJV]

Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

And throughout all the activities of the kings, there were individuals, little people like you and me in the audience watching what was going on. And in each situation, there were those who saw what God was doing and turned to Him, and others saw what He was doing and turned to Him. Through it all, there were many, many people who marveled at the ways of God, thanked Him, bowed their knee before Him, and were converted.

And so it's probably that way in Iran today. It's a terrible mess, but what's going on? Many people are saying, "There must be a God. I want to follow Him." There's no hope in the United States or the government of Iran, but there's hope in God. So I believe that...

The undercurrent all through this is God is showing His grace to individuals like you and me, and we all say, "Hallelujah." I think when we get to heaven, we're going to find all kinds of people who have trusted the Lord in those confusing days. If it's confusing for us, it's confusing for them. And moving at the same time is God's justice and mercy, and His grace and His discipline. And all of these things going at the same time, we look and we sort of say, "What's going on?" They probably said the same, but they said, "One thing we know for sure: God is God, I'm a sinner, I need Him." And they cried out for mercy.

All right. Any other comments now on the book of Kings? Because we got down to 2 Kings 25 to verse 26 last time, which ended up with many of the remaining children of Judah in Egypt in slavery. What comes after that? So any other comments before verse 27?

Sorry, that was—no. It's just—I'll make one comment. Jeremiah the prophet gives us a lot more detail concerning his ministry among those that were left in the land. If you read from Jeremiah chapter 39, verse 11, right through to Jeremiah 45, there's about five or six chapters there.

[Jeremiah 39:11 NKJV]

Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, saying,

We won't take time to look at it all, but there's a lot of detail. It's a historical account of what took place after the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as governor, and how he was killed, and then eventually they all went to Egypt. But Jeremiah continued to prophesy against them going there, but rather to stay in the land and God would prosper them. But they would not. And so many of the people that were left in the land, they went to Egypt, and so the land was basically empty of the Jewish people. There would only be a very small handful that might have obeyed the command of Nebuchadnezzar and stayed in the land, but we don't hear anything about them.

So you read those chapters in Jeremiah, their historical record, and Jeremiah gave pleading time after time telling them not to go. And finally, we read about in the Scripture themselves, but apparently Jeremiah himself was—well, he was carried, he was carried to Egypt. We don't read in the Scriptures that someone—he was killed there, actually in Egypt. He was assassinated there, he died. And so, the end of that great, that great prophet Jeremiah. But if you want to go into that detail, you can read that there in chapters 39 down to the end of chapter 45.

The Grace of God to Jehoiachin

All right. So we have in 2 Kings 25 now, the last four verses are about this king Jehoiachin. And we'll read the detail, but it's a change of pace for that king. And the verses 27, 28, 29, and 30 are repeated verbatim in the last four verses of the book of Jeremiah. Both books end on this same somewhat peculiar but refreshing theme. So let's read the theme again and see if we can get some comments out of it. Verse 27, "Now it came to pass..."

[2 Kings 25:27-30 NKJV]

²⁷ Now it came to pass in the thirty-seventh year of the captivity of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, that Evil-Merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. ²⁸ He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a more prominent seat than those of the kings who were with him in Babylon. ²⁹ So Jehoiachin changed from his prison garments, and he ate bread regularly before

the king all the days of his life. ³⁰ And as for his provisions, there was a regular ration given him by the king, a portion for each day, all the days of his life.

So here's this evil king, Jehoiachin, and he's down in prison, and Evil-Merodach becomes king. And one of the first things he does is he releases the king in prison. 37 years he was in prison. If you were in prison for 37 years, what would you expect to happen the next day? You'd say, "Well, more of the same 37. This is terrible." And instead, on a precise day, we're told, he is given freedom. He's raised back to a kingly position. He didn't get his country back, but he did get honor back and he got proper provisions back. He was, if you like, he was still a slave, still a prisoner, but he was chief prisoner and treated far more than a slave should have been treated.

And I sit back and I say, that also is characteristic of our God. We don't know what happened in the life of Jehoiachin. We're not sure. At least I'm not sure that he repented. All I know is that God continues to be gracious, and we continue to look forward to His grace. And even if he weren't repentant, the Lord was still treating him as a king of Judah, as a son of David, and treating him with honor.

I guess I marvel at the goodness of God to those who don't deserve it—people like me. And the Lord reaches out in His kindness in a wonderful way. I probably told you the story that I heard many, many years ago. The question was raised, what became of missionary children? If your father was a missionary, would that be good or would that be not good? Any advantage of having a father who's a missionary, a grandfather who's a missionary?

Some of you know David Baker. And he was supposed to be at prayer meeting yesterday; he didn't show up. So I phoned him this afternoon, and I said, "David, why weren't you at the missionary meeting, at the prayer meeting yesterday?" And he said, "Well, sorry, I didn't tell you, but I decided I was going to go to California for the funeral service." And I said, "What funeral service?" "Well," he said, "my wife's uncle just died." And then he told me who his wife's uncle was. He was William Payne, who was one of the first missionaries to Bolivia a long time ago. Did I say that right? Her uncle was the grandson of the first missionary to Bolivia, William Payne. And he said, "You know, this uncle, John Payne, in Northern California, he was a good man, and he's got good children, and we just felt we should be at that funeral."

What are the benefits of being the offspring of godly people? And the answer is, on average, you got a far better life than anybody around you. God's missionary children end up being in high positions. Children of the wicked people, they're often in low positions, they're often in prison, they're often, you know, they're in prison, in deep distress. But the children, just

because they're children of the godly, are often very godly. Praise the Lord for those who were your forebears who were godly. And so Miriam sits at the back with a smile on her face. Okay, and she says, "My mom and dad were missionaries." And she doesn't say, "And I suffered terribly as a consequence." Who else? Oh, that's right. The Christians, mother and father, they were missionaries, and he didn't suffer either. It's amazing.

And so here's this Jehoiachin. And I don't know much about him. We've read a lot about him. But I know one thing: God was gracious, not because he deserved it, but just because his father was David the king, and he was treated with honor. And God had punishment plans for his people—70 years of punishment—but it was all going to be reversed. And Jehoiachin is a picture of the beginning of that reversal.

Do you believe that Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years and the nation will begin to go back—do you believe that? And people would say, "No, I don't believe that." And then somebody would say, "Well, look at Jehoiachin." For some reason—unknown reason—some reason he gets to be reinstated. God is good. God is good to those who deserve His goodness, and God is good to those who don't deserve His goodness. God is good. He sends His rain on the just and the unjust.

[Matthew 5:45 NKJV]

that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

So those are just some unauthoritative observations on these last verses of 2 Kings. You know.

I'll make a few comments too. This Jehoiachin didn't reign very long—three months. He was on the throne for only three months. He was also only 18 years of age. And so when he was carried away to Babylon, he was just a teenager. We've got in the previous chapter, 24, verse 8, it says:

[2 Kings 24:8 NKJV]

Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. His mother's name was Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem.

And then he was carried off and put in prison there. Now this king, Evil-Merodach, who is a son of Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon—apparently, according to Josephus, the Jewish historian, and this isn't from the Scripture, but often Josephus has given us some insight into some of the history—that Nebuchadnezzar had put his son into prison at one time, and there he met Jehoiachin. And I guess they must have struck up a friendship.

And so when Evil-Merodach then came back on the throne, he took his friend out of prison, Jehoiachin, and it says he ate bread before the king all the days of his life, regularly. In other words, to eat bread before the king is to be invited to the king's council. And there he would meet ambassadors and wise men, rich merchants, and so on; all the greats of the kingdoms would come through and would eat regularly at the king's table. And we think of, of course, Melchizedek... who ate bread at David's table in a place of honor... I think his name was Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth. What did I say? Melchizedek. Sorry. I understand. We understand. Mephibosheth. Say that quickly ten times and we'll give you a nice silver dollar.

At any rate, he was raised to a place of honor. We mustn't forget, either, that it's through Jehoiachin that the Davidic line, the royal line, is preserved. It wasn't through Jehoahaz or Jehoiakim that the line was brought through, but through Jehoiachin was the kingly line to the throne of David preserved—through Jehoiachin. His son was Shealtiel, who was the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was a prince, and we'll read about him when we go into the book of Ezra, because it was Zerubbabel, Jehoiachin's grandson, who would lead the captives back to the land out of the exile.

So it leads me to believe that Jehoiachin perhaps did have a change of heart, because this godly son—or grandson—Zerubbabel was a leader among God's people, a godly man. So there again we see little pictures of God's grace and mercy and His sovereignty in preserving the royal line, because how often did that royal line hang by a thread or be preserved in such unusual ways? Behind the scenes, Satan certainly was working to just try to disrupt God's plans, to destroy the royal line. How many times did that happen? And God overruled every time, to the point where, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ, His genealogy goes back through Zerubbabel to Shealtiel to Jehoiachin—none other than Jehoiachin himself. So there's another example, I think, of God's mercy. Amen. Even in judgment, there is God's mercy to the people of God. Amen.

Transition to Ezra: The Decree of Cyrus

So what comes next? And the answer is Ezra 1:1. That's what comes next. There's a silence. We don't have detail as to a lot of what was going on, but we do know this. Ezra 1:1 says:

[Ezra 1:1 NKJV]

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,

And then he goes on to talk about the fact that the Jews could go back to their homeland. It's an amazing thing. Why would a king release a nation of people to return to their homeland after the remarkable activities that led up to Nebuchadnezzar's taking them captive? The whole story. Oh, yeah.

What was going on in Babylon and in Persia as a result of the Jews being there is an amazing story, and we all know parts of it, and many of us know many parts of it. But here's a fellow whose name is Daniel. And he grows up in Jerusalem in the context of the judgment of God and the confusion that Amir's question is talking about, and as a teenager, he's carried away to Babylon as a slave. Now, what is the conclusion to all that? Answer: bye-bye, no hope. No.

And probably being trained in his youth to take over the kingdom of Judah, certainly to be one of the royal counselors because he was of the royal seed. And I think he was a fairly intelligent boy, and I think it was probably evident to those around him. So they said, "Daniel, we've got to train you. You could one day be a great power in Judah." And Nebuchadnezzar's people understood that, too, and they took him to the University of Babylon. He went there on scholarship, by the way—he didn't have to pay his own way. So he went to the University of Babylon. And instead of going into total obscurity, he rises to a position of political prominence in Babylon. And then he's raised to the position of second in command in Babylon.

And so the question is, who's running the world? And the answer is Daniel, under the control, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel was basically running the world. Joseph was basically running the world when he was under Pharaoh. Daniel was running the world under the Babylonians. And of course, then the Babylonians all went crash, bang, bang, bang. And instead of dying, Daniel ends up running the world under the Persians. It's an absolutely incredible story.

What is it all about? It's about the fact that God made promises to Abraham and said, "I will bless you and your people. They will be a blessing to the whole world." What was the hope of people who read the newspapers in the days of Nebuchadnezzar? And their hope was,

"Maybe Daniel will talk some sense into Nebuchadnezzar's head." And he did. "Maybe Daniel will talk some sense into the head of the Persian Empire." And he did.

God's ways are amazing. But among other things, God's ways are in a dramatic way. They are there to preserve His land and His people and His promises. That's what God has done. And now it's time for His people to go back to their land, and so He gets Cyrus, the king of Persia, to send them back. What? How can that be? That's the strangest thing. But this is what it says: in the first year of Cyrus, 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, and said, "I want you to go and do this." And Cyrus, king of Persia, says yes.

Among other things, does that give you confidence in God? Does God care about His people? Yes. Are you one of His people? By the grace of God, yes. Does God care about you? Yes. And so when you pray, do you say, "Lord, You did it for David. You did it for Daniel. You did it for all these people we're going to read about in the book of Ezra, and a whole lot more. You can do it for me."

And so I guess we agree with Paul the apostle when he said, "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." All of the scriptures are given to comfort us so that we will have hope. Was God good to Jehoiachin? Yeah. Was He good to the people through Cyrus? Yeah. Is He going to abandon you? No. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

So that's the introduction here. Maybe someone could read for us what he said, verses 2 through 4.

[Ezra 1:2-4 NKJV]

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. 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. 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.

That's a pretty good letter. You'd almost think that it was crafted by one of the prophets, but it's crafted by this king of Persia. And he's basically saying, "You go back. The Lord God has

commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem." The Lord God commanded David, Solomon, to build a house at Jerusalem; the Lord God commanded him to build the house at Jerusalem. And he says, "I can't go there and do it. I will send back the Jewish people to do it, and I'll give them some money so that they can do it." Marvelous, absolutely marvelous.

God will build His people. God will keep His promises. So he says, verse 3, "If you can go, go." And if you can't go, verse 4, "then give some encouragement and some supplies and some cash to those who do go." If you can go, go. If you can't go, then help those who can go.

Some people say, "I should be a missionary." And the Lord says, "If you can go, go." And He says to those of us who can't go, He said, "Well, I can't go, but at least I can give you a few dollars. At least I can pray for you. At least I can help you. What can I do when you're gone to help you?" Good for them.

So anyway, our time is going. And Eric, I should give you some time for an introduction here, so go ahead.

Yeah, okay. Thank you. I need a little longer time just to make an introduction of these three books: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. So they were written after the captivity. But I just made a couple of comments concerning Cyrus, king of Persia—the great Cyrus. He was known as Cyrus the Great. He was not only a great general, he was a tremendous administrator. You recall the Persian Empire lasted three or four times as long as the Babylonian Empire because of the foundation that Cyrus the Great laid on that Persian Empire.

One of the things that secular history tells us is that he let many of the captives that had been taken by the Assyrians, and then had been assimilated into the Babylonian Empire... Those from the Northern Kingdom, remember, there were many there. And then those captives from Judea that were made captive by the Babylonians. So there were many Jews there, but there were people from all over. They generally—that's what the nations did, is they uprooted them from their homelands so that they would not have any nationalist uprisings. They would be taken from their homes and they would be easily, more easily assimilated that way. They had nothing to go back to.

However, Cyrus reversed this. Cyrus said, "If you want to go back to your land, wherever they had conquered, you could go back." He made proclamation. Secular history tells us this. It wasn't just the Jews that went back to their land; it was others from other places, too. In other words, there is a certain compassion to his reason. However, it was God who put it in the heart of Cyrus to do so. Amen. With the idea of His own people, because Cyrus himself said, "It was the God of heaven that told me to do this." And he was prophesied some 200 years, at least, before he ever was born. God had named Cyrus. And apparently Cyrus was

very interested in the fact that the Scriptures prophesied about Cyrus the king. He even named him, "Cyrus, my servant," Isaiah wrote, 700 B.C. So this now is 520, 536 B.C. So that's some 150, 200 years—I forget exactly how long, we could work it out, but it's some hundreds of years, a couple hundred years or so before.

And so Cyrus then, even though he allowed other peoples to go back, it was in God's sovereignty that God put the idea into his heart specifically for His own people of Judah, the Jews, to go back. And we read here that he specifically says, "commanded... the Lord God of heaven has given me... He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem." And we notice there in verse—is it verse 4? 3: "Who is among you," he says, "of all His people, may his God be with him. Let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel. He is God." I believe that's his testimony. Cyrus believed in the God of Israel. "He is God," and identifies Him as the one who dwells in Jerusalem.

So that's a little—just a little background again of the decree of Cyrus. Some have said, "Oh, well, you know, he let all the people of the world go back to their country." That's secular history. Oh, yes, but who put it in his heart to do so? And what was in his heart? What was in his heart was to obey the commandment of the Lord that had been given to him. So, we're not given this in the Scriptures themselves. The Scriptures are always only centered on the people of God. What God is doing among this people, this nation, this Jewish nation. And He only really gives much history around the surrounding Gentile nations as it relates directly to and affects the nation of Israel or the kingdom of Judah and Israel.

The Tapestry of Old Testament History

I guess I won't make any other comments. Just in closing, I might say that there are 17 historical books in the Old Testament. From Genesis right through to 2 Chronicles, that's 14. These three books, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, are the 15th, 16th, and 17th historical books. So these books then close the history portion of the Scriptures themselves. Then we go into Job, Psalms, Proverbs. Those are the Psalms, or the poetical portion of the Scriptures. And then, of course, you have the prophets.

So you have this threefold division of the Old Testament: the historical record, the Psalms and poems, and the prophecies, all linked together. And of course, they're all interconnected, because the Psalms were written at various times, the prophets prophesied at different times. And so to put all that together, to weave it together, you could never, ever put it together in... It's a tapestry. It's like a tapestry with many colors of threads that are all woven together to give a picture, and you have to trace the whole thing together. And it's a lifetime

study, but it will take, I think, eternity to really, really appreciate all that is in there in the Scriptures. It'll take us eternity.

So these three books, they belong together. The first two, Ezra and Nehemiah, have to do with the exiles—those that were in exile coming back to the land—whereas Esther is a story about those that remained in the captivity or in the land of their captivity, and so on. Also, we have three prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. And those three prophets we should look at as we study these three books at the end. We should look at those because those prophets are those that prophesied during the time of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. We'll try to help put a timeline together as we go through the studies so we can sort of keep track of everything as we go.

And frankly, it's a bit of a complex history and it's hard to get it all together. Sometimes you look at a tapestry and you say, "That's very beautiful, but I'm not sure what it's all about." And so we're going to go through, and we're going to try to learn, try to put some of the threads together, but you'll find there are lots of threads we will leave out. But what we're going to find is God is good. God used to be good, and He's going to be good. And He's even good if He has to use Cyrus, the king of Persia, to be good to us.

I've got one other question before we close, and that is: Amir, in Iran, is Cyrus considered to be a good man or a bad man?

Amir: Good man. He was a good man, yes. And his tomb is forbidden by the Islamic Republic. Many people on the birthday of Cyrus the Great want to go to visit the tomb. But every time, I remember, in recently twenty years, nobody can go on his birthday to his tomb. Sometimes they're going to destroy the tomb, but many people go in the street. Some big protests happen. Cyrus is so popular in my country.

Very good. Well, he was good to the Jews, and apparently he was good to the Iranians, too. Praise the Lord. Someone will close in prayer. Thank you very much. We'll carry on, try to get going in Ezra next week.

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for wonderful historical books that we're going to be reading. Lord, thank you so much for loving us. Thank you, Lord, for teaching us about Your goodness. And, Lord, You are good. And You're good to the evil people, and You're good to the regular people. And, Lord, You're just a good God, a God of love. Lord, thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, Lord. We're going to be studying Ezra, and we're going to be learning a lot about God's goodness. And I think we'll probably end up doing Esther and all those

wonderful books also. Thank you, Lord. They are so interesting, and they show You to be a great and wonderful God, a God that we should adore and love. Thank you, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen.

Amen.