

Hurst Green

5th May 19

Ezra 1

God's provision

This is a start of a series on Ezra entitled "Love God's word" which will show you how you should value the word of God and many reasons why.

But first we need to start with a history lesson. Have you all got a sheet of paper showing the timeline, the key events and the various references? This is not meant to be a definitive timeline showing all the details but should be enough for you to position what I am talking about in history.

History was really important to Israel because it defined who they were and it should be important to us for slightly different reasons. Time and again we are told to tell our children what God has done for us and how can we do that if we have not remembered? Much of our country and our values are still based on the Christian heritage we have from the 19th century until after World War 2.

But enough of now – let us go back in history and at the bottom of your timeline you will see Malachi and of course you know that he is the last book in the Old Testament and he finished prophesying in about 400 BC and the Old Testament was complete and we have 400 years called the long silence.

That title is, of course, rubbish – there may not have been any more books for the Old Testament but God was still talking to his people as he still talks to us today. We know that because we know of the expectation of Israel when Jesus came – we have the excitement of Simeon and Anna and Simeon even said he had received a promise from God.

But we are in the last 150 years of the Old Testament and we know the broad sweep of history:

- God brought his nation out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Due to disobedience it took them 40 years but he did it.
- They cleared the Promised Land but disobeyed God and did not do it thoroughly and so did not get it all and started the rot with many of the misdemeanours coming back to haunt future generations in the tribes they created.
- We had 500 years or so of the Judges where Israel did not cover themselves with glory and went through that cycle of back sliding, despair, calling on God and being saved and set up again.
- Then they decided they needed a King. God warned them but they persisted and so he gave them a King. First David and then Solomon who did as God had warned and taxed the people and made them build great monuments. Under Solomon by God's blessing they became a great nation.

- Then it all went wrong. There was rebellion and they split into two nations each had kings most of whom did evil in the sight of God. God always kept a remnant who did not bow the knee to Baal but must went downhill.
- God sent the prophets to warn them and comfort them but they did not listen and so they got what God had warned them about and were sent off into a 70 year exile with their nation destroyed.
- After 70 years they returned and that is the period we will be looking at. Now Nehemiah is the more popular book for this probably because it is a more fun read full of intrigue and mystery, bad hats and good hats and in the end it all works out.
- But things went on before that. On your sheet you will see three returns shown in bold:
 - 538 BC the first return with Zerubbabel
 - In 457 BC the second return with Ezra
 - In 445 BC the third return with Nehemiah
- Three returns;
 - The first to build the temple
 - The second to re-establish the worship laid down by Moses
 - The third to build the walls and re-establish the city.

This shows God's priorities, his house, his worship and then the security of the people.

- Then Israel is back on the map as a single nation. The Samaritans are still off to the North and there are the usual range of hostile tribes but the Kingdom is back. But not in the same way. After those thousand plus years they are now a vassal state and will remain so. Their masters will change and end up with the Romans but they will be under different oppressors until Christ comes.
- Then of course the game changes – the definition of the chosen people changes to include us and a very different Kingdom is established.

So that is where we are and we are going back to 539 BC and the first return which is where the book of Ezra starts. Ezra himself does not get to return until chapter 6!

We have heard Chapter one being read and you have it in front of you on page 472 of the Church bibles.

God had promised an end to the exile after 70 years and 70 years later he keeps his promise. Remember in your lives that God keeps his promises to you and to us – he is faithful.

If you want one word to summarise chapter one it is providence. Now understand that word – it is the protective care of God for his people and his timely preparation for future eventualities.

God is faithful and unchanging and as I show you God's providence for the people of Ezra's time remember that same providence is covering you.

God has you in his protective care.

God is doing timely preparation for your future eventualities. Even as you do God's work today he is preparing you for his work tomorrow so that you will be ready. You can kick over the traces as Israel did so often or you can learn from history and go with God's will!!

So let's look at God's providence starting in verse 1

Ezra 1:1 (ANIV)

¹ *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:*

That is the sort of verse you rattle through as an introduction to get to the meatier parts of the book and if you did so you will have missed so much.

The Lord moved the heart of a pagan king. God is in charge and can control the actions of the pagan just as much as he can control our actions. In verse 5 God moves the hearts of his people but in verse 1 he moves the heart of this pagan just as today he can move our hearts.

Man takes action but it is at the prompting of our God – not the gods he has chosen but our God. Just as God had used the pagans to take Israel into exile so he is using the pagans to bring them out. For many exile had not been good – do you remember Psalm 137?

Psalm 137:1-2 (ANIV)

¹ *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. ² There on the poplars we hung our harps,*

And

Psalm 137:5-6 (ANIV)

⁵ *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. ⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*

There are Jews who stayed behind – not all flooded back in the first wave but God moved the hearts of 49,897 to return (See Ezra 2). But first Cyrus had to issue his proclamation.

Ezra 1:2-4 (ANIV)

² *"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "*

Anyone could have gone back from anywhere in Cyrus' very extensive kingdom. But 49,897 chose to do so.

And we know this not just because the bible says so. To stop the nay sayers and scoffers we have this declaration from archaeology. Go up to the National Museum in London and you can see a marvellous artefact called the Cyrus cylinder which contains many things about what Cyrus did but it also contains this proclamation. Time and time again archaeology shows the accuracy of the bible and nothing that has been found disproves the bible.

You have seen here the protective care of God for his people. He has maintained them through the exile – after 70 years very few of those who went into exile will return but they have faithfully passed the promises on to their children and their children have waited for God to keep his promise and to continue take care of his people.

And God did it through this pagan King.

But remember the second part of the definition – the timely preparation for future eventualities.

God in stirring Cyrus up to also include this.

Ezra 1:4 (ANIV)

⁴ *And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "*

He provided for what Israel would need as they went back to a desolate place by providing, Gold, silver, goods and livestock as well as freewill offerings. It sounds too good to be true but it is what happened

Ezra 1:6 (ANIV)

⁶ *All their neighbours assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.*

This is not raiding the Kings treasury it is coming from the people around them as freewill offerings. They are doing this voluntarily and it adds up to an immense amount of wealth. Israel had lost everything going into captivity and so God provides everything when he brings them out of captivity.

It is the timely preparation – he provides it at the right time. If they had kept it going into exile they might have squandered it but most importantly we would not have seen God at work in it.

God's timely provision and we have seen it in this Church before I came. God provided a couple of legacies at just the right time to bring the building up to spec and sort out the manse in time for our arrival and the arrival of many of you as God has continued to build his Church here on the green in Hurst Green.

God is good!

To show his consistency do you remember another time God did this?

It is back in Exodus at the time of the Exodus. The Israelites are leaving and taking their flocks and herds

Exodus 12:35-36 (ANIV)

³⁵ *The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing.* ³⁶ *The LORD had made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.*

And they headed out for the Promised Land with a great wealth. Enough to see them into and settled in a land of milk and honey and great wealth.

God provides but in his timing. The number of times he has required people to step out and only then has he provided. In both these cases the Israelites had to go and God gave them the wealth.

Once I was part of charity trying to provide a Christian Holiday centre and we had a few thousand as seed money but nowhere near enough for our vision. Then a large country vicarage came available but it

would need a huge amount of work to make it suitable. This was not through an estate agent but straight to the executors of a will and we were asked if we wanted it.

We did not have the money to buy it but it felt right and so we said yes and outlined what we would do. They then gave us the vicarage and a large sum of money that was enough to do it up and start it operating as a holiday home. It became a great blessing to many people through Gods provision. Timely provision but in his time not ours!!

So God has provided for his people but more is yet to come. Look on in Chapter 1 and Cyrus opens up his treasury and gives Israel back all that was taken from the temple.

5400 articles in all so that Israel may restore the temple – the temple to The Lord, the God of heaven as Cyrus has acknowledged him in verse 2. This would be a great scene in a movie – all the people giving their neighbours Gold and Silver and then the treasury doors opening and a procession coming our bearing these great gifts.

The Pagan King acknowledges our God as the God of heaven, the God above all Gods because that same God has moved his heart as our God takes care of the detail giving his people Gold, silver, livestock and other freewill offerings as God demonstrates his care for his people and his timely provision for them.

He then gives them all those treasures for the temple. Of course not everything went back – the Ark of the Covenant was missing. The box containing the tablets of stone, Aaron's staff and other bits. In this 70 years that had got lost somewhere and has never been found.

The Israel that went back was not quite the same Israel that had left. They would have the temple but it was not Solomon's temple and it would be destroyed in 70AD when it was no longer needed because Israel has provided the remnant to become the Church of Christ and to move in his freedom.

That same God takes care of you and provides for you – not on your terms but on his.

That great providing God is your God who we have worshipped this morning and should continue to worship throughout this week but let me give you an extra nugget from Chapter one and it is in the last six words:

Ezra 1:11 (ANIV)

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

These 49,897 people are going to set off from Babylon on a dusty road to Jerusalem where the temple and the walls have been demolished.

They are moving from captivity to freedom, from oppression to freedom, they are moving to where they can worship God and that is the road that every pilgrim must take and is the road we have taken so that we can worship here as we wait for that New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21.

But that comes after revelation 18 which is summed up in verse 2

Revelation 18:2 (ANIV)

² *With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.*

Babylon is a symbol for the world that must fall and fall completely that the New Jerusalem can be established and all God's pilgrims must move from the worldly life style of Babylon to the God centred view of the world and the freedom of worship in Jerusalem.

That is the road that we are on – that is our pilgrimage that we walk together but learn from Ezra chapter one and acknowledge that providing God

Philippians 4:19 (ANIV)

¹⁹ *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*

Jehovah Jireh – The Lord will provide. These names of God have great meaning and are part of those promises of God for his people. Of his promises for us and for each one of us.

We are on that pilgrimage together to the New Jerusalem with its gates carved from a single pearl and where God is the temple and provides the light for the city and we are doing it under God's providence.

We live under the protective care of our God and his timely preparation for the future

While we walk with him his promises cover us and we can claim each and every one of them; walk in your own way and things will be different but walk in God's way and his promises are there for you.

As Malachi puts it

Malachi 4:2 (ANIV)

² *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.*

And what is God's way? Micah tells us

Micah 6:8 (ANIV)

⁸ *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Ephesians 2:10 (ANIV)

¹⁰ *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

It is simple to say and a lifetime to learn as we undertake this pilgrimage together; steadfast together because we live under the providence of God. Ezra 1 shows how God does provide and he is the same today and therefore will provide for you and for us.

Trust God for he is good.