

## **Setting Captives Free**

Ezra 1 - NCBC, April 10, 2016

Main Point: **God sets captives free to worship Him.**

- **God invites you to worship Him (1-4)**
  - That the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...
  - Everyone whose spirit God had stirred...
  - Let him go up...
- **God requires sacrifice in worship (5)**
  - Go up to rebuild...
- **God provides all you need for worship (6-11)**
  - All who were about them aided them...
  - The vessels of the house of the Lord...

Application: **Worship Christ who sets you free.**

- Who/What are you enslaved to?
- Do you believe in the miraculous provision of Jesus Christ?
- Are you living now in response to His Words?

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### **Opening Announcements:**

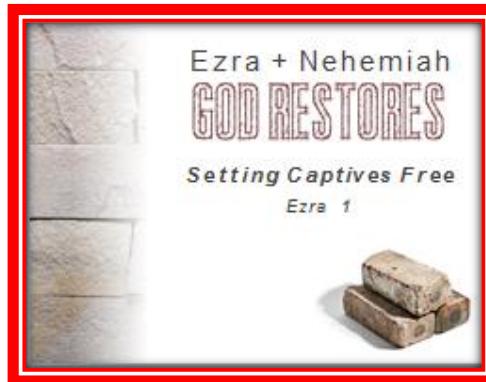
**Name Tags**

*NewComer's Lunch today @ 12 noon*

*Work Day – This Saturday – April 16<sup>th</sup> @ 8am.*

**Welcome New Members (have stand)** Quick overview of the process of becoming a member, and the spiritual benefits of membership at NCBC. Ask candidates to stand and remain standing where they are as their names are read. Read names, as slides quickly move thru their pictures as their names are read. Once all candidate's names are read, and all are standing, ask members to affirm their reception of the new members with a vocal vote "Aye!"

<<Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)>>



Our God is a holy God, and He is worthy of our worship. May we seek God with our whole hearts this morning as we look into His living Word.

Please prepare now for our reading of God's Word from **Ezra 1**. Ezra 1.

If you do not have a Bible with you today, our ushers are coming to give you a Bible. Please catch their attention as they pass by and it would be our joy to give you a

Bible. You are welcome to take this Bible home as our gift to you, or just simply return it after our service by placing it on the table in the back of the room.

Last week we started our series on Ezra-Nehemiah with an overview of God's good and sovereign hand working behind the scenes to accomplish His good purposes for His chosen people.

This morning we turn our focus exclusively to Ezra chapter 1 where God encourages His people with a historical record of a second exodus... just like God brought His children out of bondage in Egypt after 430 years, so likewise our Sovereign God graciously brings His people out of 70 years of exile in Babylon to a new beginning. Such restoration of God's people and their worship is all for His eternal glory. God here preserves a people that will bring forth our Savior Jesus Christ. So this is a thrilling account, and there's much for us to take away for our lives this morning.

You will find our text this morning on page **389** of the Bibles we've handed out. Please stand in honor God's Word, as I read **Ezra chapter 1** in the English Standard translation:

*1 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:*

*2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever 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 rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."*

*5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. 6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. 7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.*

**So has God spoken in His word.**

You may be seated.

### **Let's Pray.**

Several years ago I had the privilege of serving alongside a ministry in Jamaica called the Caribbean Christian Center for the Deaf. CCCD has a significant ministry in serving the unhearing population on the island with education, shelter, and the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jamaica has the same percentage of deaf people as most countries in the world – the difference is in how the deaf are viewed and treated by their society. In Jamaica, a deaf person is considered a “dummy.” They are outcasts – many times left to fend to themselves, and in the worse cases, treated no better than animals.

The story is told of some missionaries from this ministry traveling into the bush in search of a young deaf boy. They had heard rumors that a family had a “dummy” in this area...and so they set out to search and find and rescue this precious life.

When they eventually found this 5 year old, he was chained to a tree wearing a dog collar. A dog dish was his only source of food. This 5 year old boy was in a horrible condition. He didn't know his name. He had no language, and no way to express himself. His family resorted to just chaining him up... making him a captive to their insensitive and judgmental fears.

Can you imagine the horror of this 5-year old's life in such captivity?

But God and His grace did not leave this little boy chained to a tree. The Jamaican family gladly gave their dummy over to the missionaries, and they took him back to the school and gave him loving care, shelter, and nutrition. Slowly over time the missionaries taught this young man his name, gave him a voice through sign language, and began telling Him about Jesus Christ who died and was raised again to secure his eternal life with God.

One day this young man expressed saving faith in Christ, and his life became a picture of thanksgiving and praise. I remember sitting there during a program in Jamaica watching this young man smile with joy as he signed the words to several songs of praise and worship to our God!

What an amazing story of freedom secured by God's sovereign grace! This is the lesson of Ezra chapter 1.

This morning we celebrate that our God is a rescuing God. He specializes in emancipation. Liberation. Eternal Freedom. Freedom for our hearts that cause us to worship Him. For, in fact, our main point today is that,



God sets captives free ...to worship Him.

It's significant to remember that the Jewish people have a dark history of captivity. Starting with 430 years of bondage to the Egyptians...then to have 70 years of exile with the Babylonians, and then to be subjected to Herod and the Roman rule again in the time of Christ... God's righteous judgment has continually put the idolatrous Jews under the yoke of foreign kings.

But remember as well that the purpose of God's rescue has always been the restoration of right worship! For example, what was God's first initiative after delivering His people from Egypt's slavery? He revealed His covenant to them and established the Tabernacle for their worship.<sup>1</sup>



So now in Ezra we see the same pattern. God faithfully redeems His people from exile and brings them back with the first priority of restoring the temple and their worship. The first 6 chapters of Ezra prioritize the restoration of the temple before the rebuilding of any other part of Jerusalem. The God who restores His people after judgment deserves to be worshipped.

Even today this remains the rescuing priority of God's salvation ... God sets us free from sin so that we might worship Him.

Worship is our whole-person response to God. Since we become like what we worship, worship is about who we are before God. It's about what we love, and who we live for.

So today, are you a captive or are you free? Whoever sins is a slave of sin<sup>2</sup>... Has the Son set you free?

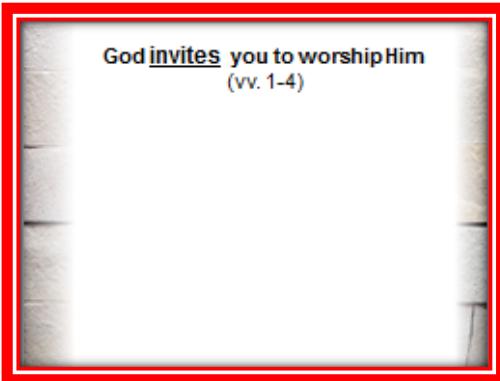
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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 25-40

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<sup>2</sup> John 8:31-36

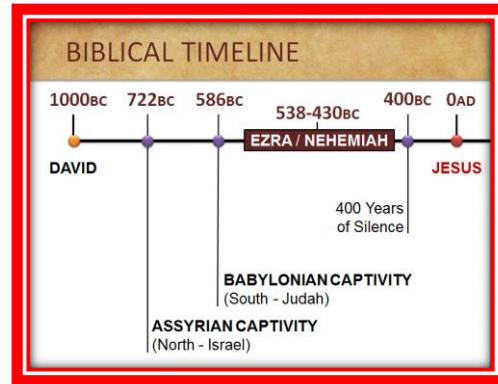
If so,



### God invites you to worship Him (1-4)

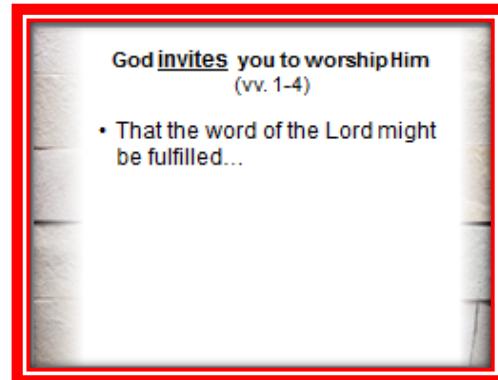
You were created to know and worship God.<sup>3</sup> But just like the Jews who were living as captives in Babylon here in Ezra 1, God is working to restore your worship...how will you respond?

For the Jews, it happened like this.



After the dividing of the Davidic Kingdom in 931 BC the Jewish people quickly succumbed to worldliness and sin. So God kept His promises. He used both the Assyrian and the Babylonian nations to execute His judgment, destroy Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, and carry the people off into exile.

The physical captivity of God's people in foreign lands now provided a terrifying witness of their hearts who were captive to sin. But God would set these captives free in the end. All in order that...



<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 43:7

... the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...

As the people were being carried off into exile, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to give them a future hope. The exile was not going to be temporary – it was going to last 70 years...an entire generation. But Jeremiah was clear in chapter 29, verses 10-14,

**Jeremiah 29:10-14** For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

*Thus says the LORD, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

Why did God give these promises for future restoration? Why did God promise to someday set the captives free?

It was all for His worship. So that the people could experience the true freedom of really knowing God. God promises to bring His people back to once again worship the True and Living God.

God invites you to worship Him  
(vv. 1-4)

- That the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...

So Ezra 1:1 describes how God stirred up the powerful king of Persia. God uses Cyrus to judge and overthrow the Babylonians in the year 539BC. And in this first year of his expanded reign over Babylon, God moves King Cyrus to issue the decree that we read in verses 2-4.

Now keep in mind that Cyrus was not a God-fearing king. He was actually politically motivated in this decree. By having some of his captives resettle their own countries it would create loyal buffer states around his empire. He didn't believe in this God of Israel, but he hoped to earn the loyalty of these people and their "god" by sending them back to rebuild their deity's temple in Jerusalem.

Possibly God used Daniel to influence Cyrus in this direction, or even inform him of Isaiah's prophecies that mentioned him by name.<sup>4</sup> But regardless, God sovereignly directed the heart of this king to accomplish His eternal purposes.

Notice too that King Cyrus didn't *command* all the Jews to return...but when he says "let him go up" in verse 3 it is best understood as permission, or even an encouragement to go, but not a command. The Jews were free to decide for themselves.

Now slip on the moccasins of one of the Jews in Babylon. This invitation required significant consideration. For the last several decades your life has been in Babylon. Sure you're a captive, but your family is here. Your life is here. And you've been resourceful to make the best of this situation so that your present conditions seemed almost favorable.

To leave what you know in Babylon and go back to a desolate Jerusalem would result in insecurity, hardship, and suffering...

So how would you respond?

Verse 5 gives the response of the people,

*Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.*

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 1:21, 9:1-2; Isaiah 44:28-45:13

Who answered the invitation?

God invites you to worship Him  
(vv. 1-4)

- That the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...
- Everyone whose spirit God had stirred...

Everyone whose spirit God had stirred...

Don't miss this church. Just like He did through King Cyrus in 539 BC, God is still today inviting people to leave sin's slavery and return to worshipping Him. It's a life-changing invitation that promises great joy...but without a doubt, God's invitation for rescue will always be dismissed, ignored, or put off by those whose heart is not first stirred by God Himself.

Salvation always begins with God's sovereign initiation of grace. God was graciously working in the hearts of the captives – so that they would pursue freedom and thus worship Him again!

What Hope! God specializes at changing the hearts of sinners from the inside out. If it was just up to us, we would never pursue freedom from sin's slavery. But God – who is rich in mercy, lavishes His love upon a people

who do not seek God themselves<sup>5</sup> - and stirs up our hearts to make us alive together with Christ.<sup>6</sup>

So the invitation continues today,

God invites you to worship Him  
(vv. 1-4)

- That the word of the Lord might be fulfilled...
- Everyone whose spirit God had stirred...
- Let him go up...

Let him go up...

Is God stirring your heart with a desire for freedom from sin's slavery? Is God stirring your heart with a desire to know Him better, to be more responsive to His presence and His promises?

God invites you to worship Him today. But just like the Jews in verse 5 who decided to pursue restoration over personal comfort and security, we must remember that,

<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:10-12, 8:8; 1 Corinthians 2:14

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:4ff

God requires sacrifice in worship  
(v. 5)

- Go up to rebuild...

God requires sacrifice in worship (5)

True worship by definition always requires sacrifice.

**Romans 12:1** teaches that spiritual worship happens when we present our bodies as a living sacrifice in response to all of God's mercies.

For the Jews to go up to rebuild the temple required a hazardous journey of 900 miles back to Jerusalem. Freedom's invitation was not one of comfort and ease.

Why respond to God's call with such personal sacrifice? Worship. Awe. Wonder at God's amazing restoration.

Such knowledge of God humbles our pride and excites our praise. But the question remains,

Is your worship cheap?

My guess is that if we took a survey – we'd all agree that God deserves to be worshipped this morning. We'd all

agree that God is worth any sacrifice that is required in order to honor and exalt His Name.

But when it comes down to our practical responses, we hesitate and protect ourselves from sacrificing too much of our time, talents, or treasure.

Cheap worship is the response captivity amnesia. If you forget that you were once a slave of sin – helplessly chained to the tree of your own fickle desires... your worship will be oddly optional and hopelessly horizontal.

But when your freedom in Christ still takes your breath away with exhilarating joy... you no longer are content to live for yourself. But you gladly live for Him who died and was resurrected again on our behalf.<sup>7</sup>

And here's the good news for us today,

God provides all you need for worship  
(vv. 6-11)

God always **provides all you need for worship (6-11)**

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

In verse 6 we see ...just like the original Exodus where the Egyptians gave the Israelites their wealth and their provisions as they left Egypt... so likewise here

God provides all you need for worship  
(vv. 6-11)

- All who were about them aided them...

All who were about them aided them...

God always provides for the work of His Spirit in His people. Always. Our God does not lack for resources. He can bring them from other believers (like those Jews who choose to stay behind in Babylon) or from unbelievers (like King Cyrus who Himself gave back the vessels which the Babylon king had seized when he overthrew Jerusalem and burned the temple.)

So if God's Spirit is stirring your heart to worship Him by turning your heart to Him for salvation, or to worship Him by pursuing a greater ministry, or by sacrificially expanding your generosity in some way... just know this morning that God will always provide what is needed to better worship Him.

Isn't it fascinating to consider that God even moved King Cyrus to return...

**God provides all you need for worship  
(vv. 6-11)**

- All who were about them aided them...
- The vessels of the house of the Lord...

...the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods?

There is symbolic joy in this account. You see, when a king captured a nation in this day, he would take the idols or "gods" and cult objects of that nation and put them in the temple of His own god – thereby symbolizing the victory of his gods over the gods of the subject peoples. This is likely why Nebuchadnezzar had carried all these objects to Babylon.

So, in many ways Cyrus giving the vessels back represented a release from their slavery to Persian gods. God sets us free from false gods – so that we might worship Him alone!

God was sovereignly moving according to His promises to restore a nation of worshippers. To restore a temple

for worship. A temple that would be used to make atonement for sin, and allow the people to again meet with their God.

So verses 9-11 list a specific tally of thousands of articles used in the temple worship that Cyrus returns to Sheshbazzar to take back to Jerusalem with him.

The mention of Mithredath the treasurer helps us understand that Cyrus was working through official channels by commanding one of the treasurers in his kingdom to release these vessels to the Jews. This transaction would have been recorded in the Persian libraries, which Ezra the scribe would have access to years later as he wrote down this account.

The end of verse 11 would have elicited shouts of Amens and Hallelujahs for all the faithful Jews of the day.

*"All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem."*

Amazing restoration. Miraculous exodus. God setting captives free for the purpose of their greater worship of Him.

### Main Point

God **sets captives free**  
to worship Him.



Have you been delivered from sin's slavery? God invites you to worship Him. Yes there is personal sacrifice required for the Christ follower, but God has provided everything you need through His Son Jesus Christ.

It's quite spectacular really. Jesus paid the death penalty for our sins – taking our place and sacrificing Himself so that by believing in His finished work of resurrection we might receive a new heart by God's Spirit. Loved ones, you don't need to believe lies any longer. Wherever God's Spirit is, there is freedom.<sup>8</sup> And God's Spirit brings about this freedom by revealing the glory of Jesus Christ.

Will you believe in Him this morning? Will you worship Christ this morning with your whole-person response to who He is and what He has done?

This morning I urge us all to,

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:17

### Application

**Worship Christ**  
who sets you free!



**Worship Christ who sets you free.**

Believe on Christ – He is the true Son of God – and then employ all your energies and your resources in making much of Christ! Remember worship is not about an emotional experience... true worship is a response of your entire person to God's Word. Worship is always sacrificial and transformative... for we become like what we worship.

So ask yourself

#### Worship Christ Application

- Who/What are you enslaved to?
- Do you believe in the miraculous provision of Jesus Christ?
- Are you living now in response to His Words?

## Who/What are you enslaved to?

The answer to this question is what you worship. It's what you love. Your worship always reveals your greatest love. Either you are living for yourself today or you are living for Sovereign King Jesus who always keeps His promises in eternally rescuing whoever trusts in Him.

## Do you believe in the miraculous provision of Jesus Christ?

I know it seems like it would take a miracle for your life to be different and for you to truly know peace again. But just such a miracle has been done – God is able to set captives free. Believe and call out to Jesus this morning, and you will be saved, rescued, liberated from the slavery of sin's power...for *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*<sup>9</sup>

And then, worship Him.

## Are you living now in response to His Words?

At a foundational level, this is what it means to worship God. To live out your faith in responsive obedience to His Word. There is no greater joy you could know than the freedom of obeying God's Word.



Ezra chapter 1 is a strong testimony to the reality that God delights in setting captives free to worship Him.

May God stir in all of our hearts as we respond to His Words this morning – for the greater worship and praise of His holy Name.

Let's pray. **Closing prayer.**

<<10,000 Reasons – Bless the Lord>>

Next week we have a very special guest coming to our pulpit. **Brian and Jessica Russell and their children** are no strangers to New Castle and it is our privilege to support them as church planting missionaries in a difficult place in the middle of Mormon country. They work under the auspices of **RHMA** and have already served the Lord in Wyoming and Colorado. Brian has opened God's Word to us before and we welcome him to our pulpit once again.....

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<sup>9</sup> John 8:34-36

*Now, may we go forth and bless the Lord our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with His unfaithful people from everlasting to everlasting.*

*Nehemiah 9:5, 32*