

The Word of the King

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, your word is living and active. It penetrates to bone and marrow. It exposes the secrets of our hearts.

You are faithful to your word and you always achieve what you send your word to do. So Lord, we pray that your word will achieve its purpose this morning, that you would allow your word to dwell in our hearts and cause us to lift our eyes to you once again.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I'm 11 years old in primary 5 and I've been having a very bad day.

My friends haven't been nice to me. I had to endure a trumpet lesson I'm rubbish at. And on top of that, I'm developing a fever. So by the time school is done, I'm very much looking forward to going home.

But as the minutes take by and one by one, cars arrive and students depart, I'm wondering, why haven't I been picked up yet?

[1 : 10] And soon an hour has gone by and I'm more or less the only kid left. So someone makes a phone call from the school office. Remember, this is an era of no handphones.

And it soon becomes clear there is some mix-up and my parents have forgotten to bring me home. And that just makes a bad day worse.

Being forgotten is no fun. And it's especially no fun when we're forgotten by those we love most. Ever felt the pain when your father forgot your birthday?

Or when your best friend of many years forgot that shared memory that you enjoyed together, the one you thought was special? And what about collectively?

Ever felt the pain of being part of a community that's neglected and left behind simply because of your skin colour or your accent? And what if you've been forgotten by God?

[2 : 15] Perhaps today, we Christians look at the political situation in Malaysia and we feel a little pessimistic. After all, it seems as if non-Christian leaders who are potentially more hostile to the Gospel are on the rise.

Perhaps we look at the rapidly shifting cultural understanding of gender. And we feel threatened by an ideology that feels very foreign, even intimidating to us.

Perhaps we look at the church in Malaysia itself and worry that there seems to be a lack of leaders coming through or that just about every Christian organisation has been reporting engagement at Christian events and conferences have been worryingly low.

And perhaps as we look and look all around us, we feel forgotten by the one we love most, God himself.

And that's where we are as we come to Ezra 1 verse 1. I hope the video that we showed just before our Bible reading gave you a sense of where we are in the Bible-speak story.

[3 : 27] But let me just recap the part immediately before Ezra 1 verse 1. Babylon is the new superpower in town. They've totally destroyed the Egyptian army and they've overrun more or less the whole of Syria.

Meanwhile, the king of Judah has bet on the wrong horse. He's decided to take the side of Egypt. And before he knows it, Babylon is at the gates of Jerusalem.

And it doesn't take long for Babylon to overrun the city, capture the king, plunder the temple, leave it in ruins, and take away many of its citizens to Babylon.

But surely, some of the Israelites' reason, they will all turn out okay. After all, God has promised them, I will be your God and you will be my people.

Surely, God won't forget them. Indeed, there was one prophet who even said, oh, only two years at most and God's favour and blessings will be restored.

[4 : 40] But that prophet turned out to be false. Anyone thinking they will go home soon would be in for disappointment. Indeed, the prophet Jeremiah said it would take 70 years.

In other words, it will take a lifetime. Judgment has fallen and it will take one entire generation to see any form of restoration.

If you had to leave Jerusalem in 597 BC, the year Babylon came, you wouldn't be alive to come back again.

So put yourself in the shoes of an exile. The years tick by and you watch your children grow up with no first-hand knowledge of a king from the line of David, no first-hand experience of temple worship, no first-hand familiarity with the city of Jerusalem.

And you feel as if your own first-hand relationship with God is cooling. He doesn't seem to be around. What if there's some mix-up and God forgets to take his people home?

[5 : 57] What if he's forgotten all the promises he's made? And is it that us too? We too are exiles in this world. That's how the Apostle Peter describes Christians.

We too are away from home because this fallen world in this present age is not our home. And sometimes being away from home it can feel like we're also away from God.

Sometimes it can feel as if he's left us all alone in a world where our identity in Christ is constantly challenged and our hope in him is regularly questioned and we feel forgotten.

And that brings us to Ezra chapter 1. Today Ezra 1 is here to act as a reminder. It's a memory prompt. It's there to remind us of two key truths whenever we feel forgotten by God.

So let's turn now to the text itself and here is the first truth to remember. The word of the king will come to pass. We begin by being introduced not to Ezra himself but to a king Cyrus.

[7 : 21] In fact let me give you an advance warning. Over the course of this book Ezra will introduce us to a number of kings. But Cyrus takes center stage here.

He's the king of Persia something the text reminds us no less than three times in the first two verses. It's as if we need to know there's a new ruler in town.

He's the guy in charge now. Indeed look at what he says in verse 2. The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.

Now that sounds very pious at first glance but as we'll see later Cyrus is no believer. it's actually a humble brag. Hey guys, did you notice who's got all the kingdoms in his hands?

Did you notice who God has to give the world to? That's right, it's me. Later on, one of his successors, Arthur Saxus, will modestly describe himself as the king of kings.

[8 : 32] So let's just say that these Persian kings don't lack self-esteem. But you understand his confidence, don't you?

After all, he's just overthrown Babylon, an ancient civilization with an impressive pedigree. And what he says goes. In verse 1, he issues a proclamation and the fact that he's put it down in writing makes it official.

universal, perpetual. His word will come to pass. He's the one with all the power. God's people, on the other hand, are the ones without any power.

And isn't that where we find ourselves today as well? So often, we Christians are at the mercy of others, a government, an administration, a department who are not at all God fearing.

We're the minorities and the nobodies. We can only watch as those in the corridors of power play all sorts of political games, wondering if we Christians will be collateral damage along the way.

[9 : 48] But watch what happens. You see, Cyrus too is a master politician. He knows that previously, the Babylonians had opted for a policy of suppressing people's faith.

It's why Daniel and his friends are taken to Babylon in the book of Daniel. The king wants them to forget being God's people and become Babylonians and worship their gods.

But overall, it doesn't work. That kind of repression merely bred more resentment. And so, in verses 2-4, Cyrus decides to take a different path.

He decrees the Jews can go home. They can even rebuild their temple. Now, that seems so unbelievable that for a very long time, many scholars concluded that the Bible must have gotten the history wrong precisely at this point.

But, about 150 years ago, a clay cylinder measuring just 9 inches long was uncovered by archaeologists.

[11 : 05] And that cylinder, now known today as the Cyrus Cylinder, which you can see today in the British Museum, makes references to Cyrus' new policy.

You can see it on the screen. And guess what? Turns out the Bible is right. For this cylinder, tells us that Cyrus said that the people he conquered, so not just the Jews, others as well, could return to their homelands.

They could even have freedom of religion. They could build their shrines to their respective gods. They just had to pay their taxes like any other good citizen.

Cyrus thought that if people were given their religious liberties, they would be happy, and thus they could be more easily controlled. So Cyrus is no believer.

He is merely a political pragmatist looking to preserve his power. In verse 2, he knows how to play the game. He makes sure to use the language of the people by calling their god the lord Yahweh, and claiming credit for the fact that their temple can be rebuilt.

[12:22] He is a bit like some Malaysian politicians who as soon as they know that they are speaking to the Christian community, make sure to quote a bit of the bible, play up the fact that they were at such and such a mission school in their youth, and promising to provide funds for the church building project.

Not because they are believers, but so that they can secure our vote. Indeed, the Cyrus cylinder shows Cyrus sweet-talking Marduk worshippers, as well as those who worshipped the pagan gods Baal and Nebo.

He doesn't care which god it is, as long as he has their favour, and he reaps the benefit of public order and increasing tax revenue. So here we have the word of a self-serving king, and what he says goes.

Ezra now says, let me open your eyes a little bit more. On the surface, you see a king playing politics.

You see a king exercising his power. You see a king massaging his ego. But Ezra says, look again. There's actually another king at work.

[13:43] Verse 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.

It is the Lord, we learn, who moved, or more literally, stirred up Cyrus to act as he does. It is the same Lord who, unknown to Cyrus, years ago, had also stirred him to begin his world conquest so that he would get to this point in Ezra 1 verse 1.

You see, turn with me for a moment back to Isaiah 45 verse 1. It's on the screen. What does the prophet Isaiah tell us? This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of, to subdue nations before him, and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him, so that gates would not be shut.

Now, consider Isaiah's words. What a shock it must have been. Here is a pagan king being called the anointed.

Surely only priests, prophets, and kings of Israel could be anointed? Surely God could only use his own people to accomplish his own purposes. But Isaiah says you've got to expand your view of God.

[15:20] The Lord is not the Lord of Israel alone. Now, that's what people like Cyrus think. Notice in Ezra 1 verse 3, he refers to our God as the God who is in Jerusalem, as if he is just some territorial God who can only do stuff there.

But Isaiah says God is the God of the whole world. That's his point. There is no jurisdiction that is not under him.

And so God can choose, take, and even use Cyrus, a non-believer, to carry out his purposes. And that's what he does, to subdue and take down Babylon.

But God has more in mind. Look at Isaiah 45 verse 13. I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness, I will make all his ways straight, he will rebuild my city and set my exile free, but not for a prize or reward, says the Lord Almighty.

In other words, Isaiah says God has always had Ezra 1 verse 1 to 4 in mind. He was always going to make sure Cyrus did what he did, even if Cyrus sees himself as completely independent.

[16:52] So do you see how God has been initiating all this well? From one point of view, it is Cyrus doing stuff, but from another, it is really God who is running the show.

It may have been Cyrus' word coming to pass, but really, it is God's word coming to pass. And Ezra 1 verse 1 tells us that it is not just God's word in Isaiah that's coming to pass, but Jeremiah as well.

But what did Jeremiah say? Well, in places like Jeremiah 25 verse 11 and 29 verse 10, God says that after 70 years, there will be a homecoming.

God's people will be able to go home. So my brothers and sisters, what does all of this show us about our God?

It reminds us he never loses control. He is sovereign. Even the self-serving words of a proud king is used to make sure that the word of the divine king is coming to pass.

[18:05] Here is an encouragement for us. Yes, we're not home. And sometimes things don't look good. Sometimes political developments worry us.

Sometimes the church seems to be at the mercy of many more powerful than us. But our God remains on the throne. Kings and politicians and other kinds of human influences may be in the drama, but this is still God's drama and these characters cannot act apart from God.

He will have his way. Even the places where God's name is not acknowledged is never out of reach for him. To use the words of Proverbs 21 verse 1, In the Lord's hand, the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels towards all who please him.

God will ensure his will be done. This is the consistent teaching of scripture. As even the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar realizes earlier in Daniel chapter 4 verse 35, All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him, what have you done?

[19:35] And so God does as he pleases. But because God is also always good, he exercises his freedom for our sake.

remember what happens a few centuries after Ezra. God's people are back in the city of Jerusalem, but in a sense they are still in exile because the Romans are in charge.

And they've decided to put to death a Jewish man, even though they can see that he's done nothing wrong. But as the Roman governor Pilate writes the sign, this is the king of the Jews on top of the cross, as the soldiers divide the lot for Jesus' clothing, as a sponge is lifted up on a hyssop plant to quench Jesus' thirsty lips, over and over and over again we are reminded all this is because the word of the king is coming to pass.

All this is done to fulfil the scriptures, the gospel writer John keeps saying. And when Jesus says it is finished, in one sense he's saying all that he has come to do has been fulfilled.

Because the word of the king has come to pass, our sin is paid for, our adoption is secured, our inheritance is guaranteed, and our confidence is sure.

[21:10] God will be to remember. And as we remember this truth, we can pray. We can pray for rulers, and authorities, and all those in power, because we know God has the ability to use them for his purposes.

God can use them to ensure that his gospel can be advanced. Now, that doesn't mean that as we pray, we will expect all opposition to the gospel to stop, as the later chapters of Ezra will show us. But it does mean that we can be confident God can use any event, no matter what, for his purposes of redemption.

And so that's the first truth we need to remember. The word of the king will come to pass. But now Ezra wants to teach us a second truth.

The work of the king is for our restoration. The work of the king is for our restoration. You see, in Jeremiah, God isn't just promising the exiles that they can balek kampong.

[22:28] He has more in mind. Now, here is Jeremiah 31, verse 4 to 6 on the screen. This is what God says. I will build you up again and you, virgin Israel, will be rebuilt.

Again, you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again, you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria. The farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.

There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God. See, this is what God says.

Back in Jeremiah 3 verse 8, God says you were like a prostitute. You polluted the land, Jeremiah 3 verse 9 says. But now, I'm building you back up.

I'm restoring you. I'm making you my pure and holy bride. I'm bringing you joy because I'm going to restore your relationship with me.

[23:32] You can say now, come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God. But how is that going to happen?

Well, when we look at the first seven verses of Ezra 1, what is constantly being mentioned? I'm sure you can't miss it. It's the temple.

In fact, the temple will become the main focus of the first half of Ezra. Why? Why is it so important?

Well, we must remember that the temple is not just another ancient monument.

It's not even just a place to hold religious services. No, it was the very place God said that we could go and meet him. Now, don't forget, that's what God created us for.

He wants us to be in communion with him even as he is in communion with us. That's why the Bible begins with us in the very presence of God as he relates to us in the garden.

[24 : 40] God and he relates to us in the garden city. It's why this intense presence of God appears to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai.

And it's why God has a temple. Even though we have sinned, God wants to be among us. and so he provides a temple, a place of sacrifice so that we can meet with him.

He wants us. You see, does God want to give us good things? Does he want to see us happy?

Absolutely. But he says you will finally and ultimately gain all of that if you come into right relationship with me.

You won't find happiness and joy ultimately if you simply seek to have an easy life or you just want lots of stuff. That's not how it works. You will only find joy when you truly meet with God, come into his presence, know him as your heavenly father, make your home with him.

Then even a hard life or lack of stuff cannot rob you of joy. But here is the big question now for the people of God in Ezra chapter 1.

[26 : 11] Do they see that? Do they get that? You see, God's temple in Jerusalem currently lays in ruins. But God's people are far, far away in Babylon.

And they've been there for a long time. And here's the thing. Imagine for a moment that you're an 18 year old. You've lived your entire life in Babylon.

Your parents, in fact, might have been born in Babylon too. And all of you are doing all right. You have a house, business is doing well, your friends are here. It's only your grandparents who might have some vague memory of Judah.

But even then, you're not sure if their memories are all that reliable since it was so long ago. And their homes and businesses in Judah are long gone anyway.

Oh, and yeah, they know Hebrew, but you yourself, your Hebrew isn't so great. You know, just enough to get by during the festive season when your grandparents friends pop by during the open house and then they talk to you in Hebrew and then you're like, let me try to speak in this language.

[27 : 23] So Babylon is actually where you are comfortable. So when Cyrus says you can go home, the question is, why would you?

Is Judah really home? What about Babylon? Why would you go? Well, verse 5 tells us why some did. Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites, everyone whose heart God had moved, prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem?

You see, why did the people go and venture into the unknown and uncertain when life was currently familiar and comfortable?

Because just as God moved the heart of Cyrus, he now moved the heart of his people. imagine now that in Babylon you attend the synagogue regularly and every week the person in the front reminds you of all of God's promises.

He tells you the story of how God brought you out of Egypt and gave you the plans for the tabernacle and later on the temple so that you can live together with God.

[28 : 48] And if that is true, wouldn't you want the temple to get going again? Wouldn't you want to see not just the temple but to see God's blessing flow throughout the entire promised land again to see his very kingdom established?

You see, without the stirring of God in our hearts, we will not move. We need his enablement now and always to do his bidding.

But how does God work in us? Is it by simply telling us, hey, get moving? No. It is through his word, it is by showing us who he is, by showing us what sort of person is asking us to give up our comfortable lives to go and meet him.

Look at Ezra 1, verse 7 to 11. When you read those verses, they don't seem at all inspiring, do they?

It's just a list of kitchen utensils. Not exactly hard-stirring stuff, is it? I mean, what relevance does this have to us? But my friends, listen to the word of the Lord.

[30 : 11] What is the significance of all these items? Well, if you go to 2 Kings chapter 25, verse 13 to 14, or Jeremiah 52, verse 17 to 18, these look like the very things King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from Solomon's temple.

And, verse 7 tells us, he placed them in his own God's temple. In other words, they became things dedicated to the Babylonian god, Madhuk.

They sat there, as if to say, hey, Madhuk has defeated Yahweh. After all, if God couldn't stop Babylon from stealing these things, he must be weak.

He must have been defeated. But what do we have here in chapter 1, verse 7 to 11? Babylon is no more.

But the items used for worship in Yahweh's temple are still around. In fact, they are going back to Yahweh's temple.

[31 : 24] So, who is the real winner here? You see, by making sure that these things were kept in Babylon's temple, God made sure they were not lost or sold on the black market, but preserved for the time when God would bring his people back home.

In other words, God always intended for God's people to keep worshipping him, just like their forefathers. He was just biding his time.

He knew that he would always emerge the winner. Do you see how God always keeps his promises?

Do you see how God never gives up, but preserves his people so that they will worship him? Even what happens in verse 6 tells us this.

It seems as if not just the Jewish community, but even the non-Jewish community generously donated many objects and materials for the temple.

[32 : 33] And that very act record the very first exodus, when the Israelites asked their Egyptian neighbours for articles of silver and gold and receive them.

In other words, Ezra is implying what is happening here is nothing less than a new exodus. So my brothers and sisters, this is our God.

He doesn't just stir up kings, he stirs us up. He says he will stop at nothing to restore his relationship with you, to make sure that you can still be his people and meet with him.

Now today, you might be feeling discouraged by everything that's going on around you. You might feel discouraged that God's people look too insignificant, too complacent, too irrelevant.

But God says he will restore us and his word will definitely come to pass at his initiative and timing. Yes, when you look around, you have to take that in faith.

[33 : 50] After all, like many of the exiles in Ezra 1, we have never seen our destination. salvation. But just as the exiles are coming up from Babylon to Jerusalem in verse 11, we too still travel on to the new Jerusalem.

It is a journey of faith. But God says, I hope you can see that I'm more than worthy of your trust. I have kept every promise, and even the smallest details, like the preservation of temple items have not escaped my notice.

So follow me, even if it means leaving familiar surroundings and a comfortable way of life. And that means following Jesus today.

You see, unlike the people of Ezra's day, we have no need for a physical temple because Jesus himself has become our temple, through whom we can meet God via his sacrifice.

We meet with God through him alone. But the New Testament does say there is still a temple today, and that temple is not a physical structure, but it is us, his people.

[35 : 16] As 1 Corinthians 3 verse 16 says, don't you know that you yourself are God's temple, temple, and that God's spirit lives among you? And God says, that is where the building still goes on.

We are still to build one another up, so that we might offer ourselves up as free will offerings. We cannot make sacrifices of atonement, that's Jesus' job, but we still offer ourselves up freely as living sacrifices to worship him.

And that is something we will see more of as we progress through Ezra. But for today, let's remember this, we are not forgotten, God will bring us home.

The word of the king will come to pass, for the work of the king is for our restoration. This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you once again that your word is not something that is static, that is dead, but your word is how you grow us in our salvation, and how we can taste that you are good. [36 : 43] So Father, will you give us confidence today, even as we have heard from Ezra chapter 1, that you are indeed the Lord, the God of heaven, the God of the entire earth, and nothing escapes your notice, nothing moves without your permission.

So let that build up our confidence to keep trusting you, even as we travel on to the new Jerusalem. All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen. the CSV