

Missional Pluralism: Cyrus and the Sovereignty of God

Ezra Chapter 1

Last week we launched a new sermon series, *Renewal: Return from Exile*, a study through the book of Ezra. We will be taking a chapter a week, so I encourage you to be reading through this book of the Bible. Write down your questions. Check out the resources listed on the Sermon Series page on our website. Ask God to renew you through this series. This morning we will be in Ezra chapter one, where we find the details regarding Israel's release from Babylonian captivity to return to their Jewish homeland. The big question we are asking this morning is "*Why did Cyrus let the Jews go and what bearing does that have on our roles as Christians?*" We are going to be doing some deep thinking this morning, so jack in and let's pray.

Divine Sovereignty & Return from Exile

The opening lines of Ezra read: "*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. 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. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem...*" A little background. The Jews are living in exile in Babylon under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Persia, Cyrus, rolls in and conquers the Babylonians, establishes his world empire, and sends out a royal decree permitting the exiles in Babylon to return to their homeland. Apparently he showed special favor to minority peoples, Israel included. Now why would he do this? Why would Cyrus send Israel back to Jerusalem? Wouldn't this weaken his empire, dilute his power, loosen his control? Why release the exiles? This is the question we will be answering all morning. Let's start with verse one. Notice this line: "*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.*" Why did Cyrus let the Jews go? According to this verse, *the reason Cyrus released the exiles is because he was fulfilling a prophecy by Jeremiah*. It sounds bizarre, I know. Jeremiah was a prophet that stayed in Jerusalem during the exile. He wrote a letter to the exiles and gave them lots of instruction and encouragement. A copy of this letter is preserved in Jeremiah 29, and in it we find this statement: "*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.*" A promise from God through Jeremiah that the Jews would return to their homeland after 70 years were completed. Some have taken this to mean they spent 70 years in exile. However, there's some discrepancy here. If we date from the year of exile, it's not quite 70 years, so it is more probable that the 70 years refers not to years of exile but to years of Babylonian domination. Regardless, the point being made is that God made a prophetic promise that Israel would return to their land within a specific timeframe, which is incredibly accurate. So how in the world did Israel get released from Babylon? According to this evidence, it was by *the sovereign will of God*. God foretold and foreordained it through Jeremiah. What do we think about that? Some of us are so influenced by the Enlightenment, rationalist worldview that we find prophecy unbelievable. You don't have room in your worldview for it or miracles. I'd like to suggest that you have a narrow worldview, that you're not being very open-minded. After all, you have to reconcile the spiritual prediction with its historical accuracy. And if you find that uncomfortable, consider the next

phrase in Ezra 1:1 "*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.*" Here we find even more support for the sovereignty of God as the reason why Israel was released from exile. Not only was it according to prophecy, it was *God stirring up the spirit of Cyrus so that he would make this proclamation.* Man, we are ruffling feathers this morning! How offensive to post-Enlightenment, self-reliant, American, rationalists! The very thought that God can sovereignly stir us to action, is an affront to our values of freedom and radical individualism. After all, aren't we the captain of our own destinies? Not according to Scripture. If God can stir the heart of the Persian Emperor, then he can certainly stir our hearts. Proverbs 21:1 "*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*" Interestingly, Cyrus didn't seem to have a problem with the sovereign God of Israel. In v. 2 he remarks: "*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.*" Cyrus recognizes Yahweh, the God of Israel, as the God of the Heavens and that Yahweh had given him all the kingdoms of the earth...looks like we've got a convert on our hands! If the pagan Emperor Cyrus can acknowledge that the God of the heavens gave him the kingdoms of the earth, then surely we can together with him acknowledge God's sovereignty in returning the Jews from exile, perhaps even in our own lives? So how does the return from exile happen? By the sovereign, heart-stirring work of Yahweh. But how did pagan king Cyrus come to this conclusion? I mean it wasn't just a release; he's even insisting that he help rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. It's like he's become a Jew or something. This smacks of Jewish bias, doesn't it? Have the history books been doctored? IS this Jewish spin? I mean, are we *really* supposed to believe that a) God is sovereign, even over Emperors b) that Cyrus just let the exiles walk right out of Jerusalem c) and that he supported the rebuilding of the Jewish temple?! I think there's something more than the sovereignty of God at work here. What is it? Persian pluralism.

Persian Pluralism & Return from Exile

History tells us *the reason Cyrus let the Jews go is because he was a pluralist; he practiced cultural and religious tolerance.* Pluralism is the belief that plural, multiple, cultures or beliefs or political positions should be tolerated and encouraged. The Persian Empire was known for its political and religious pluralism. They released exiles from *several different* cultures and religions, not just Jewish. We know this from the *Cyrus Cylinder* where the Edict of Cyrus mentions the return of various peoples to their cities: "*I gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitation*" (ANE, 316). Commenting on Persian policy, Jon Berquist writes: "The empire did not try to enforce a single imperial language, culture, legal system, or religion...it desired order—not necessarily Persian way of life...[it] seemed to promote a degree of acceptance and tolerance, even of pluralism, within all of its provinces" (*In the Shadow of Empire*, 45). As it turns out, this policy of tolerance served the Persian Empire well. Instead of making enemies of their subjects, they made friends. The various peoples under the reign of the Persians practiced a great deal of cultural and religious freedom. This freedom cost them taxes to the Persian government but at least they weren't under the thumb or exiled in a foreign land. So, you see, good history tells us that the reason the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem wasn't because of the sovereign will of God, but rather, the pluralistic public policy of the Persians. Which one are we to choose? God's Sovereignty or Persian Pluralism? Maybe you're thinking about Cyrus's apparent conversion to the God of Israel. I mean if he became a follower of Yahweh, then this would all make sense. It would

be the sovereignty of God and the Yahweh worshipping tendencies of Cyrus. The only problem with that is that Cyrus never became a worshipper of Yahweh. In fact, he was a worshipper of the Persian god, *Ahura Mazda*. Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, a religion from ancient Persia (Iran) that dominated that region prior to the coming of Islam. But what are we to make of his laudatory comments regarding Yahweh: "the God of heaven"? The Cyrus Cylinder and other artifacts tell us that Cyrus actually used this phrase "God of heaven" for other gods that he perceived helpful in his conquests. Cyrus likely saw Yahweh as another tribal deity. No deep reverence here. Cyrus was no monotheist. Far from it. He was a political and religious pluralist who was ready to add any god to his pantheon in order to extend his reign over the known world. Sovereignty or Pluralism? Well, as we press deeper into Cyrus' beliefs, it turns out that his political pluralism was rooted in his religious pluralism. Zoroastrian beliefs allowed for the adoption of other gods into its system of belief and worship. It is characterized by a dualism in which *Ahura Mazda*, the god of light and goodness, struggles to overcome a powerful evil spirit. Cyrus simply saw Yahweh as a helper to *Ahura Mazda* and his heavenly army and the forces of light in their struggle to defeat the dark forces of evil. Cyrus didn't see Yahweh as sovereign but *Ahura Mazda* as sovereign. Cyrus wasn't a monotheist he was a polytheist. He honored many gods, so you see, Cyrus' religious beliefs played nicely into his political philosophy. Why did Cyrus send the Jews back from exile? *Because* he was a savvy pluralist. He adopted their god (religious pluralist) and engendered their trust and taxes through freedom of religion (political pluralism). It was his policy of pluralism that actually strengthened the Persian Empire. By allowing the various peoples to practice their religion in their own lands, he gained great support across the empire. *His pluralism supported his power.*

Christian Response to Sovereignty Meets Pluralism

How do we make sense of all this? What is the Christian response? How did the Exile happen? Sovereignty or Pluralism? It was God's sovereignty *and* Cyrus's pluralism. *God sovereignly embedded his will in history and pagan politics and religion.* God's sovereignty is not at odds with pagan idolatry. He actually uses it! Israel returned to Jerusalem, according to Jeremiah's prophecy *and* through the pluralistic politics of the Persians. God sovereignly stirred Cyrus to proclaim the return from exile, *while also* using Persian pluralism at this precise time in history. God's sovereignty embedded in history, a union of divine sovereignty and human activity (Prov 16:33; Phil 2:12-13). Now, this has interesting implications for us today. What is the Christian response, the Gospel response to this remarkable union of divine sovereignty and human pluralism? Do we just throw up our hands when it comes to politics and say God is sovereign? Or do we invest ourselves heavily into pluralist politics? I suggest three main responses. **Response #1: Support the Empire by seeking the good of the city.** Like the Persian Empire, the American Empire is a bastion of political pluralism, the land of cultural and religious freedom and tolerance. Hundreds of cultures and religious beliefs flourish here. When it comes to elections and political parties, we shouldn't see them as a religious silver bullet, a way to "restore the Christian nation" or to suppress the evangelical nuts. Instead, we should support freedom of religion and focus on serving the public good. Cyrus did. We should seek the good of the city and not politicize our faith. Israel did. The Jews were good citizens when they were in Babylon. Jeremiah told them to settle into Babylon, buy houses, marry, and seek the peace of the city. Are we good Austin citizens? Are you seeking the peace, the good of the city? Do you support local business, local art, local music? Are you trying to overturn social ills, poverty, gentrification, neglected elderly? *Support the Empire by*

seeking the good of the city. **Response #2: Support the Empire through missional pluralism.** Wow. That sounds liberal. What do I mean? [Diana Eck of Harvard's Pluralism Project](#) identifies several main features of religious pluralism: 1) Active seeking of *understanding* across lines of difference 2) Not relativism, but the encounter of *commitments*...it does not require us to leave our commitments behind 3) *dialogue*, not agreement but being at the table. Missional pluralism means being tolerant of other faiths, other cultures, other political views *without surrendering your theological commitment to Jesus as Lord*. It means you aren't threatened by other views because you believe God is sovereign, and because you believe God is sovereign you press into his mission by talking with others about what they believe, winsomely sharing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. You don't just keep Austin weird, you also show that Jesus should be worshipped. Now, you're probably responding to this in one of three ways. **First**, some of you have already made commitments to Christ, but refuse to come to the table of dialogue. You are afraid of what others think of you if they find out you are a Christian. *You're neither pluralist nor missional*. You don't dialog about your commitments. You're a private Christian, which is really no Christian at all, the opposite of Paul who said "I am not ashamed of the gospel for in it is the power of salvation to all who believe" (Rom 1:16). You need to repent of worshipping others approval and trust that Jesus approval is enough, and be a missional pluralist. Press into conversation. Hold fast to your commitment to Jesus as Lord. **Second**, there are Christians who are *missional without pluralism*. You throw stones at those who believe differently. Try to force your beliefs on others through politics and rants. You can't tolerate anything different than your own theology and views. You refuse to give others the dignity of unbelief, unbelief in Jesus as Christ and Lord (although it won't be a dignified position on Judgment Day). You do well to learn from Cyrus. He did not enforce Zoroastrianism onto the Jews. He respected their religion and their god without professing personal allegiance to YHWH. You need to repent of worshipping your doctrine instead of your Savior and trust that God is sovereign enough to use anything to share his gospel and it's only by his grace that he shared it with you. **Third**, some of you don't have theological commitments to Christ or any God. You are free-floating. I challenge you to make some. *You are pluralists without a mission*. You lack purpose and confidence in faith. So: (1) Support the Empire by seeking the good of the city. (2) Support the empire by being a missional pluralist. And **Response #3: Subvert the Empire by being a peculiar saint**. Sometimes we need to subvert the empire in love. We should support it as much as we can without sinning. But sometimes the cultural trends (clothing, film, music, sexual ethics, political policies) are contrary to Christian faith. In those areas we must remain exiles, peculiar holy people who do not look like the world, people who not only talk about Jesus but act like him. People who are modest, pure, discreet, truthful, excellent, and holy. People who practice Philippians 4:8 "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me- practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*" Practice these things and you will receive the promise of God's peace. God's sovereignty is embedded in human history, including 21st C America. How do we respond? Support the empire by seeking the peace of the city. Support the empire by being a missional pluralist. And when necessary, subvert the empire by being a peculiar saint.