April 18

Happy Monday everyone.

Today we will continue or walk through the books of the Bible with a look at the book of Ezra. It was written in about 450 BC and covers the period between 538 and 450 BC after the Jewish people had been sent into exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. It takes place during the reign of the Persians, who had conquered the Babylonians, and tells the story of the return of some of the Jewish people back to Jerusalem to begin the work of rebuilding the temple.

At its core, the book of Ezra is about God’s faithfulness and the way in which He kept His promise to restore His people to their land. At the book’s outset, King Cyrus is the king of Persia, and these are the opening verses:

“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill 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 also to put it in writing: “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. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem’” (1:1-4).

Right off the bat, we see that God is fulfilling His promise as spoken through the prophet Jeremiah (“This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:11)). The seventy years have passed, and it is important to note how God goes about fulfilling His promise: He “moved the heart” of a pagan king who, at the time, was one of the most powerful men on earth. Such is the work of the Almighty.

Have you ever had times that you felt that you were in “exile?” Have you felt the sorrow of loneliness or the grief of loss? Have you felt that God hasn’t heard you? If so, my prayer for you today is this: God always fulfills His promises, and nothing is outside of His reach. It was this same prophet, Jeremiah, through whom God spoke when He made the greatest promise of all: “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (31:33).

This promise was fulfilled yesterday, on Easter morning, when the stone to the tomb was rolled away...forever.

IHS, Pastor Lou
Grace and peace to you this day.

Continuing today with the book of Ezra, some of the Jewish people have returned to Jerusalem and under the direction of their governor, Zerubbabel (I love that name!), they have succeeded in laying the foundation of the temple. This is how Ezra records it:

“When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. 11 With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord:

‘He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.’

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away” (3:11-13).

Understand what is happening here. The original temple, the beautiful one built by Solomon, had been completely destroyed by the Babylonians seventy years earlier. It was so completely ruined that it could not be repaired, and a new one had to be built. The people had returned from exile and had to lay the foundation for the new temple. This was backbreaking work that had to be done by hand, one stone and one brick at a time. And so, after having their temple destroyed, living in exile for two generations, making the months long trek back to Jerusalem, taking many more months to labor under the hot Jerusalem sun, this is how the people responded: “With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord.”

Well, not everyone. Some longed for “the old days.” Some wanted things to be the way they were before. And so they wept. Loudly.

What are we to learn from this? Here’s what I think. It’s ok to think about the past and remember it, as long as we don’t live in it. The same is true of the church. Our direction, as we see in this passage, is forward, with a new foundation, remembering that our real foundation is, and always has and will be, the steadfastness of the Lord. “For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

IHS,
Pastor Lou
Greetings to you this day in the name of Jesus, the Risen Messiah.

Having laid the foundation of the new temple, the Jewish people had attracted the attention of neighboring tribes, who were threatened by this work. As a result, they wrote to the king, and he ordered that work on the temple be stopped. The people fell into despair once again. Ten years passed until a new king, Darius, ordered that the work continue.

Eighty years after the work had commenced, Ezra leaves Persia under yet another king, Artaxerxes, and returns to Jerusalem. As we have said many times, the Lord has no problem letting us wait. Because He exists in eternity, His timeline is not based on the calendar, but on the infinite. Eighty years is a long time to wait for your temple to be built, especially for those of us who are used to having the world instantly at our fingertips via our smart phones. Not so for the Almighty.

In any case, as I ponder God’s timing of things, consider the time it took Ezra to even get to Jerusalem:

“Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (7:8-10).

Let me ask you: How many of us would travel, on foot, for five months to serve the Lord in a place you’ve never been to? Camping by the roadside at night in hot and cold, rain and dry. Hunting and scrounging for food day after day.

And yet, as we see here, Ezra was so dedicated to the Lord and His commands that “the gracious hand of God was upon him.” Pretty amazing stuff.

As a practical matter, how did Ezra do it? Like everything else, he did it one step at a time, and one day at a time, until literally, through the grace of God, he got to his destination.

Like Ezra, we too have a destination, but it’s not Jerusalem. As followers of Jesus, our destination is heaven. I’m sure that there were days when Ezra was tired and discouraged. There were probably other days when he was joyous and cheerful. Just like us.

So today, be encouraged. As God’s gracious hand was upon Ezra, so it is upon us as, like Ezra, we journey to our destination.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
April 21

Greetings, DGCC Family.

As we discussed yesterday, it took Ezra five months to travel from Persia to Jerusalem. However, he did not travel; alone. There were hundreds of people who traveled with him. I can imagine that it was quite a sight.

No doubt there were weeks of preparation that took place in order for this many people to undergo a five-month trip on foot. One can only imagine the supplies that had to be gathered and packed, the animals that had to be cared for, and so on. Interestingly, Scripture makes absolutely no mention of any of that. Instead, this is how Ezra himself describes how they prepared for the journey:

“There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.’ So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer... On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days” (8:21-23; 31).

Ezra had it right. Earthly preparations are important, but not nearly as important as placing our trust in the Lord. That’s what Ezra and the people did, and the Lord answered them by delivering them safely to their destination.

And so, my prayer for you today is this: as we continue on our journey to our ultimate destination, like Ezra and the people, let’s always strive to place our trust, and our faith, and our confidence, in the One who will surely lead us there.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
April 22

Happy Friday, everyone!

Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1jmqVU4RDo

IHS,

Pastor Lou