

Our Sovereign God

The Book of Ezra

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Dedication

To my mom, Sue Harris, and my sister, Becky Shipp, who have shown unwavering faith in our sovereign God despite years of struggle with cancer. They are an inspiration to all.

Our Sovereign God: The Book of Ezra

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Preface

THE BOOK OF EZRA highlights the certainty of God's sovereignty amid ungodly leadership, political unrest, and strong opposition to Biblical truth. Sounds like today! When hit with dire daily news and dismal predictions for the future, we act as if our society just needs different leaders to regain hope from this hopelessly broken world. In reality, hopelessness can reign only where God does not reign.

Let's face the facts! The world has been broken since Eve and Adam were kicked out of Eden. A perfect world might exist in Hallmark movies and romance novels, but the real world is seriously marred by sin. That is the bad news. But there is good news. The good news is that since Adam and Eve permanently altered God's perfect world, God has been at work redeeming it. Throughout every generation and in some of the most difficult situations in history, His hand of mercy and grace has been evident. He has always been in complete control. That is why in the midst of problems, hardships, and uncertainties, God always ask His children to trust Him. We are to put our hope in Him, to look to Him for help, to rely on His promises, because God reigns supreme in the midst of every political order at every point in history.

And it is never clearer than in the story of Ezra. Ultimately, God is the star of this drama of hope for a fallen world, but some key players are Ezra, a faithful man who passionately sought to know and obey God; Zerubbabel, a man who led the way back to build the temple; and the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, who boldly proclaimed God's truth to turn the nation back from its sinful pursuits. World leaders take a backseat in

importance to God's agents. I pray that as you study Ezra 1—6, you will commit to being a person of unshakable faith, a woman who is not afraid to take action, one who will boldly proclaim God's truth despite the political climate, and one who watches to see how God will move.

When God Moves, Godless Leaders Fulfill His Plan

“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will” (Proverbs 21:1).

SITTING ON THE EDGE of my chair while national election results rolled in, I had a sick feeling that somehow the world was spinning out of control. The political leaders who were obviously going to win didn’t carry any semblance of Christian character, and their voting records confirmed it. I fumed that if the wrong political leaders took office, they would lead our nation to certain ruin. Didn’t God care who takes charge in a nation?

Foolish worries in hindsight. Not because the leaders acted Biblically or made good laws. Instead it was foolish because I forgot that no man or woman in any leadership position can thwart God’s ultimate purposes. God cares very much who is in charge of nations. But the real person in charge never changes from year to year: God is always in control of the actions of presidents, kings, shahs, prime ministers, and even dictators. Not only is He in control, but He is fulfilling His plan through various men and women who don’t even know He exists. This lesson will help us focus on the Person Who really is in charge.

God’s Perspective

The Jews knew all about ungodly leaders, both from within their nation and from external sources. The book of Ezra

highlights God's sovereign intervention during a low point for the Jewish nation. As a result of their disobedience, God had previously allowed godless nations to take them captive. The book of Ezra begins after a Persian king conquered Babylon, Judah's most recent captor. Ezra records God's intervention in Jewish history in such a spectacular manner that it forces us to regard His power and control over all rulers. It reminds us that nothing is too hard for God.

God Is Sovereign, So He Orchestrates All World Events for His Purposes

Read Ezra 1:1 and 2.

These first two verses in the book of Ezra highlight two important theological truths: God keeps His word, and He works to fulfill His word. First, notice the simple reference to inspiration: "the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah." The writer explains that what happened was a fulfillment of God's word through Jeremiah. Jeremiah 29:10 and 11 say,

For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Ezra 1:1 shows that God not only inspired these words, but He also orchestrated the affairs of several major world powers and the heart of a pagan Persian ruler to bring these words to pass in the time frame mentioned. Why? Because what God says will happen will always come to pass. It is His Word.

Hebrews 6:17 says that God's promises are based on the "immutability of his counsel."

1. We live in a day in which skeptics cast doubt on the truth of God's Word and mock the idea that ancient prophecies will be fulfilled. How important is it to your faith that God's Word is completely true? Explain.
2. It is not only ancient prophecies to Israel that God declares are unchangeable. Read Luke 24:44–47 and Titus 1:2. Record at least two sure promises that all believers can count on.
3. When have you counted on one of these promises?

Let's look at the unique circumstances, recorded in the first chapter of Ezra, that God used to fulfill His prophecy and complete His sovereign will.

God Is Sovereign, So He Can Move Godless Leaders to Do His Will

Read Ezra 1:1–4.

We might assume by reading these verses that Cyrus (also called Cyrus II and Cyrus the Great) was a follower of the one true God or at least a peaceful leader, but this man would never have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Cyrus the Great, known as "Father" by Iranians, founded his empire by revolting against his grandfather. So much for Mr. Nice Guy. His empire grew as he conquered more and more territory

to the east. With Persian and Median nobles in his government, his rule extended east over the Mediterranean region. As leader of the Medes and Persians, he proceeded to invade and conquer Babylon. I don't think the Israelites living under Babylonian rule jumped for joy when they discovered they had become subject to Cyrus the Great. But God's ways are not our ways, and He had a big surprise in store for them.

4. Below, list the things that God moved Cyrus to do for His beloved children.

Ezra 1:2

Ezra 1:3

Ezra 1:4

I am struck by the irony of the things God moved this pagan man to do for the Jewish nation. Imagine Cyrus—king and ruling monarch of the largest empire in the world—who had just finished a campaign to take over much of the known world, waking up one day and

- acknowledging that his power and conquest came from the God of Heaven,
- listening to God's command to build a house for Him in Jerusalem,
- allowing captive people to leave, and
- allowing those former slaves to take silver, gold, goods, livestock, and other offerings away from his nation to go build God's house in Jerusalem!

Perhaps we cannot understand the magnitude of these things without reviewing a few historical notes about how conquering kings dealt with captives and their riches.

5. Look up the following references and describe the actions of a typical conquering king.

2 Chronicles 36:1–3

2 Chronicles 36:5–7

2 Chronicles 36:17–21

God Is Sovereign, So He Can Move His People to Obey

To fulfill His plan, God also had to move His people back to the Promised Land. We might think they would be excited about returning, but they would return to ruins, not homes. The trip would be long and arduous. Plus, they had lived in Babylon for seven decades and had formed new lives there. But nothing is too hard for God. He always fulfills His plan.

6. According to Ezra 1:5 and 6, what happened within the Jewish community?

God prompted His people to return to the land, and He was rather persuasive: everyone He moved to go arose to go. Note, too, that the community offered precious gifts to willingly aid them in their return to the land. Perhaps this was as great a miracle as the godless king giving his wealth freely. These people had been in bondage and probably did not have much wealth. But when God moved among them, their hearts were changed to do His will, even if it meant sacrificing financially.

7. God used Cyrus and His own people to supply the needs for a return to Jerusalem, proving once again that nothing is too hard for Him. What difficult or seemingly impossible situation are you concerned about? After reading Ezra 1:1–6, how will you view the situation that concerns you?

God Is Sovereign, So He Can Move Ungodly Leaders to Fulfill His Plan

Read Ezra 1:7–11.

The scenario in Ezra 1:7–11 makes me think of a power-hungry bank robber suddenly giving all his money to build a church. History books explain, however, that Cyrus was unique: “As a conqueror turned ruler Cyrus revealed to the world another aspect of his greatness. Unusual for a king of the time, he showed respect and tolerance for the beliefs and practices of the various kingdoms of the earth.”¹ Not only did he set people free and allow them to return to their homelands, “most amazingly, he [let] them recover their statues and gods—all the things that were confiscated as symbols of victory—and go back to their lives and religions, worshiping their gods in their own way and in their own temples.”²

While everyone admits this change of heart is not natural, few understand its supernatural origin. Long before Cyrus conquered his first land, his role was predicted in the Bible.

8. Read Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10, 11. What did Jeremiah predict when Judah was first taken captive years before the time of Ezra and this event?

Even more amazing is that Isaiah predicted the name of the ruler whom God would use to accomplish these events.

9. Summarize the prophet’s prediction in Isaiah 44:24–28 and 45:1–6.

Over 150 years before Cyrus came to power, God told Isaiah to record Cyrus’s name as the one who would subdue nations and restore Jerusalem! These are very specific predictions. God

wanted us to know that He has both history and future events planned well in advance.

10. How do these specific predictions and their fulfillment impact the following?

Your faith in God?

Your trust in the truth of God's Word?

Your reliance on God's control over the world?

God Is Sovereign, So He Can Use Ungodly Nations to Punish Erring Children

It's exciting to read Ezra's account, because God moved Cyrus to do great things for Israel. But sometimes God uses ungodly rulers to accomplish something different—the discipline of His children. Such an idea appalled the prophet Habakkuk. It dismayed him that God would use a wicked, heathen country to correct Israel (Habakkuk 1:12–17). As in Habakkuk's day, we don't get to pick and choose how God acts. His sovereign control means that He alone knows what each nation and each person needs to fulfill His perfect will. Whether we suffer at the hands of ungodly rulers or enjoy their blessing, we must rest in the knowledge of God's ultimate control.

When I read, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Proverbs 21:1), I visualize a giant chess board on which God is moving rulers, good and bad, into the exact spots He wants them to be in order to accomplish His end game. It is comforting to know that a sovereign God is in complete control when things often seem out of control on earth.

11. How big a role does your knowledge of God's sovereignty play in your everyday life?

God Is Sovereign, So He Always Fulfills His Promises

Today's lesson was geared to help you focus on Who is really in charge in the world. It might not be national leaders that keep you up at night. It might be someone in your family who causes you to lose sleep. It might be a tough financial or desperate health situation that makes you think the world is spinning out of control. My prayer is that by grasping the amazing things God did in Ezra, you will refocus on the power and sovereignty of God, and hopefully breathe a sigh of relief that God has your entire situation under control.

Faith in God's sovereign plan does not mean we don't participate in government or use our voting privileges. It does not mean we don't go to doctors or seek financial help or marital counseling. It certainly does not mean we don't pray about concerns. But we were never meant to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. God alone does that for us. So we should never forget that we have a God Who is in control.

Remember these important facts about God's sovereignty:

- He orchestrates all world events for His purposes.
- He moves godless leaders to accomplish His will.
- He always fulfills His promises.
- He is in control of every detail of your life.

Your Perspective

1. Write a prayer of commitment, stating your confidence in God's ability to rule in every situation you will ever face. Include prayer for your national leaders. Although we do not need to fear ungodly rulers, we do need to pray that God moves among all rulers to accomplish His will.

2. Memorize Proverbs 21:1 and record an insight you gained from meditating on it.

Prayer Requests

Write your concerns here. Be sure to come back to record how God took care of them.

My Perspective

When my family was young, we visited beautiful Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. The cliff dwellings were amazing, but the road to get to them was treacherous. It didn't help that my husband often took his eyes off the road to give some commentary to our children. When I finally said, "Please will you be more careful driving? You're scaring me to death," my small son piped up from the backseat, "I'm not afraid!" When I commended him on trusting his dad, he replied, "I'm not trusting Daddy. I'm trusting God."

I need to trust God, praying that He will move in the hearts of leaders in my town and nation, but also in my heart to do His will without question. I also need to praise Him for His sovereign control over all the results on election night and every other day of the year. I want my world to know what an amazing, great God I serve.

Endnotes

- 1 Robin Currie and Stephen Hyslop, *The Letter and the Scroll* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2009), 215.
- 2 "The Significance of the Cyrus Cylinder," IHF America, Oct. 14, 2012, cyruscylinder2013.com/2012/10/significance-of-the-cyrus-cylinder.