

# Rise, Return, Rebuild: When God Moves Hearts

*Ezra 1:1–11*

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Have you ever looked at something broken — a relationship, a dream, a city, a town, or even a church — and wondered if it could ever be rebuilt? Ezra and Nehemiah are books about just that: restoring and rebuilding. They begin with ruins — Jerusalem destroyed, the temple gone, the people scattered — and yet they testify to one great truth: God keeps His promises. Even in exile. Even in ashes.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were traditionally a single book — they were divided only about five hundred years ago — and they are meant to be studied together because they tell the same story: the sovereign God restoring His people for His glory. That sovereign God, who stirred the hearts of kings and exiles long ago, is still stirring hearts today.

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## The World That Made the Return Necessary

To understand where Ezra begins, we need to go back nearly two hundred years before its opening verse. In 640 BC, an eight-year-old boy became king of Judah. His name was Josiah, and he would become one of the greatest kings Judah ever knew — and its last great one. Josiah was a godly king, and he reigned for thirty-one years. But he inherited a kingdom in deep covenant failure. For three generations — sixty years, stretching back to the reign of his grandfather Manasseh — the worship of the Lord had been not merely neglected but forbidden. The doors of the temple had been shut and locked. The people of Judah were barred from entering the house of the Lord and worshiping according to the covenant and its law.

When Josiah was sixteen he began to seek the Lord, and when he was twenty-four he gave instructions for the temple to be reopened. So around 622 BC, after roughly seventy years of closure, the temple doors swung open. Priests entered to begin cleaning and repairs, and in the course of their work they found the Torah — the book of the law, most likely the book of Deuteronomy. They read it, and they realized just how far the people had strayed from everything the Lord required. They brought it to Josiah, and as he heard the words of the law read aloud, he was undone. He tore his clothes and said, *“For great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out on us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do*

*according to all that is written in this book*” (2 Chronicles 34:21). Josiah launched a sweeping program of religious reform across Judah.

But as the saying goes, it was too little, too late. Jeremiah, the prophet of that hour, condemned the revival as shallow and insincere. *“Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD”* (Jeremiah 3:10). He went on to pronounce the coming destruction of Judah. And yet, because Josiah himself was genuinely penitent and humbled himself before the Lord, God declared that the judgment would not fall during Josiah’s own lifetime (2 Kings 22:18–20).

The days of Josiah came to an end in 609 BC. That year, Josiah rode out from Jerusalem to the Valley of Megiddo to intercept the Egyptian Pharaoh, who was marching north to support Assyria in its war against the rising power of Babylon. Josiah succeeded in his purpose — he delayed Egypt long enough for Babylon to finish off Assyria — but he died at Megiddo. And with his death, the final countdown for the kingdom of Judah began.

By 606 BC, Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar had consolidated control over all the territories once held by Assyria. One of Nebuchadnezzar’s first demands was that the smaller kingdoms of the region — Judah among them — pay tribute and surrender political hostages from their ruling classes. This marked the first wave of Judean exiles taken to Babylon. Among that group were young men you may have heard of: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah — young men who had grown up under Josiah’s reforms and who knew the Lord. And it was that same year, 606 BC, that Jeremiah gave this remarkable prophecy:

*“This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste.”* (Jeremiah 25:11–12)

I believe Daniel himself heard these words from Jeremiah’s lips before being taken into exile — because Daniel is one of the people who was counting down those seventy years.

Not everyone who heard the prophecy believed it. One who refused to was Zedekiah, a son of Josiah and the last king of Judah. Zedekiah surrounded himself with false prophets who assured him that God didn’t really mean seventy years, and that the Lord was going to use him — Zedekiah — to lead the people to freedom. Rebel, they told him. Throw off the Babylonian yoke.

Jeremiah was beside himself. What are you doing? God said seventy years, and He means seventy years. Jeremiah repeated the promise plainly: *“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”* (Jeremiah 29:10). And there, in that same letter to the exiles, Jeremiah

told the people to trust God’s word and settle in for the long haul — build houses and live in them, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the city where God had placed them. Do not be deceived by false and lying prophets. Zedekiah, however, was deceived. He rebelled. And because of that rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar came to Judah and did exactly what had been prophesied in the days of Manasseh (2 Kings 21:10–15): he scraped it clean. In 586 BC, the city and the temple were destroyed, and thousands were taken into captivity.

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## **God’s Sovereignty: Keeping His Promise and Stirring the Heart of Cyrus**

The year is now 536 BC. Seventy years have passed since Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity. Seventy years since the Lord spoke His promise of return through the prophet Jeremiah. And now that promise is about to be kept.

Cyrus, king of Persia, had defeated Babylon in a largely peaceful takeover in 539 BC. Not long after, he issued a decree permitting exiled peoples — the Jews among them — to return to their homelands. And so it is here, in 536 BC, exactly seventy years after the promise was spoken, that the book of Ezra opens:

*“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, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel — he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 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.’” (Ezra 1:1–4)*

This is nothing short of astonishing. When Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, the kingdom was obliterated. The city was a smoldering ruin. The temple was reduced to rubble. The people were scattered, exiled, and silenced. Everything that had once marked them as God’s covenant people — land, temple, king, identity — was gone. By every human measure, their story was over.

But our God is sovereign. To Him belong all authority, power, and glory. When God speaks, His word does not fail. Through Jeremiah, God had declared a promise: in seventy years, you will return. And now, against all odds, against the power of empires, against the verdict of

history, that promise is fulfilled. The sovereign God, who raises kings and topples them like dust, stirred the heart of Cyrus to set His people free.

Let us pause for a moment and lift our hearts in awe of our God's sovereignty. To say that God is sovereign means that He reigns as supreme King over all creation, that He holds all power and authority in His hands, that He rules over the rise and fall of nations — that He is King above every ruler and every realm, guiding the course of history according to His perfect will. Not a single event escapes His authority. Not a single moment catches Him by surprise. The Lord is upon His throne. Our God reigns.

This is why I know that the Lord always — always — keeps His word. The sovereign God is faithful to His promises. He did not forget His word to the people of Judah, and He does not forget His word spoken to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. So do not be like Zedekiah, who surrounded himself with false prophets and doubted the Word and promises of God. Trust the Lord to keep His word to you, because He will do it.

Here are some of the promises of God on which you can build your life. In Christ, the Lord will be with you always (Matthew 28:20). In Christ, God works all things for good (Romans 8:28). In Christ, God will complete His work in you (Philippians 1:6). In Christ, peace is given to you (John 14:27). In Christ, God hears your prayers (1 John 5:14). In Christ, you are forgiven (1 John 1:9). In Christ, nothing will separate you from the love of God (Romans 8:38–39). In Christ, death has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55–57). In Christ, you shall rise again (John 11:25–26). And Christ is coming again (Mark 13:26).

These are just some of the promises given to us according to the New Covenant that is in Christ Jesus, who is, as John describes Him in Revelation 1:5, “*the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.*” He is seated with majesty on high, ruling and exercising sovereignty over the Middle East, North Korea, China, Russia, Europe, Africa, and even the United States.

I know it is easy to become discouraged watching the news or scrolling through the internet. There is so much division, so many lies, so much noise and meaninglessness that it is hard to imagine what life will look like in the years ahead. That is why I find such deep comfort knowing that Jesus is the ruler of kings on earth. All of it — all the junk and chaos we witness every day — is in His hands, and I trust Him.

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## **God's Sovereignty: Stirring the Hearts of His People**

The sovereign Lord who stirs the hearts of kings also works in the lives of everyday people like you and me. Notice how God not only stirred Cyrus to give permission for the return — He then stirred the hearts of the Jewish people themselves to go:

“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.” (Ezra 1:5)

This stirring of the people’s hearts is an often-overlooked detail, but a profoundly important one. God is not only sovereign over kings and nations — He is sovereign over hearts. Over lives like yours and mine. His sovereignty is deeply personal. And because of that, for many people, it is also deeply confusing.

When people hear the phrase “divine sovereignty,” they sometimes imagine a kind of cosmic puppeteer pulling strings, making our decisions for us, fixing the whole universe so that personal choice is an illusion and human action carries no ultimate meaning. That is not what Scripture teaches. The Bible does not teach fatalism. God’s sovereignty does not erase human choice and responsibility — rather, God’s sovereignty is what makes us truly free.

Let me try to explain. The phrase “free will” is itself a bit misleading, because it implies that our choices are made in a vacuum, untouched by influence or limitation. But you can test this on yourself: every decision you make is shaped by your circumstances — your health, your upbringing, your finances, your fears, your hopes. And most importantly, your choices are governed by your desires, by what you most deeply want. And this is where the Bible speaks with particular clarity: our desires are not neutral. They are bent. They are broken. They are twisted — or, as some have put it, depraved.

It is because of these twisted desires that we so often do what we know is wrong. The word *iniquity* in Scripture carries the idea of a bending or warping of what is meant to be straight and good. Iniquity is not just doing bad things — it is desiring wrongly, loving the wrong things, or loving good things in the wrong order. It is why people sabotage their own joy. It is why they choose pain over peace. It is why they lash out in anger when what they most long for is connection. It is why they run from the very relationships they most deeply want to keep. It is not that they do not know better — it is that their desires are disordered.

We see this everywhere in ordinary life. A man who genuinely wants to be faithful to his wife finds himself flirting with someone at work — not because he doesn’t love her, but because he also craves the thrill of attention or escape. A young woman longs for stability and belonging, but repeatedly returns to relationships that wound her. She knows the pattern. She hates the pattern. But something in her heart still chases what hurts her. A teenager lies to his parents — not because he doesn’t love them, but because he fears their disapproval more than he values their trust. A Christian says they want to grow in faith, but spends hours scrolling through social media instead, not because they think it’s doing them good, but because it is easier, more immediately comforting, more gratifying than prayer or Scripture. Our hearts chase crooked paths because our desires are bent.

Consider one more example. A person addicted to drugs may deeply love their children. They may genuinely hate what their addiction has done to their family. But the craving for that substance overrides their conscience. They lie, they steal, they abandon the people who depend on them — not because they are unaware it is wrong, but because their heart has been captured by something else. The problem is not ignorance. It is iniquity — a twisted desire that has enslaved them. And though they are enslaved, they are still held responsible for their actions. A drug addict who steals or harms others is judged and held accountable. And so are we all.

Spiritually speaking, we are all addicts — enslaved to selfishness, bent away from God. And though we are responsible for our choices, we cannot, in our own strength, untwist the twisted heart. Paul's lament in Romans 7 is the cry of every honest soul: "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*"

This is what makes the sovereignty of God such good news. The God who stirred the hearts of exiles in Ezra's day is the same God who stirs our hearts today — not by overriding the will, but by transforming the desires. He straightens the twisted affections so that we begin to love what is truly good, holy, and beautiful. He frees the will from its bondage.

Salvation is not simply that we turn to God — it is that God turns our hearts to Him. Philippians 2:13 says it plainly:

| "*For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*"

God doesn't merely tell us what is right — He awakens us to desire it. It is God's stirring that turns a heart of stone into flesh, that makes holiness beautiful, that makes Christ precious, and that makes obedience not merely possible but joyful. When God stirs the heart, He is not overriding the will — He is freeing the will from the bondage it is in, so that we begin to love what is lovely, to long for what is holy, and to chase what is genuinely good. This is an inward work of grace, something He does that we cannot do for ourselves.

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## **God's Sovereignty: Providing Everything That Is Needed**

And this miracle of grace that resurrects the heart also provides everything we need to do what God calls us to. We see this clearly in the closing verses of Ezra 1. God did not merely stir Cyrus to act and the people to return — He supplied everything needed for the journey and the work ahead:

*“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. 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. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 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.” (Ezra 1:6–11)*

These verses don’t describe a few travel supplies or spare coins. This is an enormous treasure trove — gold and silver vessels, costly wares, and sacred temple artifacts, now being carefully inventoried and returned. More than 5,400 sacred objects, along with animals, goods, and generous offerings, were given to a people who had nothing. They were exiles — displaced, impoverished, uncertain about everything — and yet God moved the hearts of their neighbors, even their former captors, to supply everything they would need for the journey and the work that waited for them in Jerusalem.

This was not charity. It was the sovereign hand of God preparing the way — stirring generosity, reclaiming what had been stolen, and pouring out abundance for His redemptive purpose. He gave them what they needed to rebuild the temple, according to His promise.

Today, these physical provisions given to the returning exiles point us to something far greater. We are not rebuilding physical walls and temples — we are being rebuilt as living temples, dwelling places for Christ who lives in us through His Spirit. And what God provided to those exiles in gold and silver, He now provides to us in Christ out of a heavenly treasury. As Peter writes: *“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness”* (2 Peter 1:3).

Consider the treasure we have been given for our rebuilt lives. He gives us the righteousness of Christ: *“He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). He gives us His Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17). He gives us His Word, which is *“profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16–17). He gives us a hope that cannot be taken, an inheritance that does not fade, and a future already secured in heaven (1 Peter 1:3–4). When God calls us to follow Him and to live as living temples, He does not send us out empty-handed. He gives us Himself.

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## **Rise. Return. Rebuild.**

As we close this morning, I want to ask you a question. Is God stirring your heart today?

Has He been nudging you toward repentance, calling you to return to Him, to rebuild something broken? Perhaps there is a fractured relationship, a neglected calling, or a dry and distant spiritual life that He is pressing upon your heart right now. Perhaps, like the exiles, you have grown used to life in Babylon — settled into routines that feel safe but are far from God's best. And now something is stirring. A sense that you were made for more. A quiet inner voice saying: *Rise. Return. Rebuild.*

Don't ignore that stirring. The sovereign God of heaven is drawing near to you in love. He does not merely command — He supplies. He does not only stir — He strengthens. He does not simply call — He walks with you every step of the way. He is building His church still. He is faithful to His promises still. And today, He may be stirring yours.

Say yes to what the Spirit is doing within you. Say yes to trust. Say yes to the Lord who keeps every word He speaks.

Rise. Return. Rebuild.