

Stirred up to go where God leads

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[0 : 00] The title of my sermon this morning on Ezra 1 is Stirred Up to Go Where God Leads, and I want to have our focus on that climax in that text that Jono read to us so well.

Verse 5, 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.

I invite you to pray with me before we turn to God's word. Dear Father, we ask that you would tune our hearts to hear your word this morning, that you would give us a renewed sense of delight in your word, of delight in being with your people in your house.

We ask that our thoughts and all of our doings today as we go forth from here will also be pleasing to you in your sight.

We ask that you would strengthen us for the tasks we face ahead. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. It's quite something preaching from up here, having seen the particular play that happened here some nights ago, Stella and I come.

[1 : 36] And so it's a little bit of cultural whiplash, I guess you could say, knowing what action took place here, having Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.

It's great. But that's why our prayer book, it's a prayer book, as J.I. Packer says, a prayer book for real people in real places and real situations. So as I think of the gospel coming into this scene here, I think it's great.

What motivates someone to dedicate himself or herself to a major task or life work? No doubt there's something of a mystery there because I suppose any number of things could come together to lead us in one direction as opposed to another.

But my guess is that if you go up and ask someone who has stayed with something for the long haul, as we say, if you ask them what led you to do that, they'll probably say that they had a strong sense that there was nothing else that they should be doing or that they would rather do.

Well, in our text in Ezra this morning, that's what happened to a whole group of exiled Jews as God himself gave them a strong determination to leave what they knew behind and to go to Jerusalem to rebuild Solomon's temple that lay in ruins.

[3 : 07] It's that stirring that I want us to reflect on this morning, specifically, how it came about, what it teaches us about God and his ways, and what it might mean for us today.

As many of you know, our rector has now arrived in Rwanda to attend the Global Anglican Future Conference, otherwise known as GAFCON, which begins tomorrow.

And as we face something of a real regathering and restructuring in the Global Anglican Movement, I think there's a sense that God has been, and is now even, stirring many hearts toward a new beginning, a reformation even, where faithfulness to God's word is paramount.

I certainly feel that stirring myself, particularly as I think of the moment of great upheaval God is allowing us to go through. And that is reflected in the life that we see reflected in the life of the church throughout the world.

Now, good historical sense, I think, teaches us to be careful in drawing conclusions about the present moment we're going through that are too precise or overly precise.

[4 : 25] However, I think it's safe to say that the dividing line between two churches, effectively, is becoming more and more apparent every day.

It happens to cut right through Christian denominations and not between them. One is a church that is positively comfortable in Babylon, and as such is determined formally to bless behaviors in the area of sexual ethics.

We've heard about a lot. I won't spell out details, but in the area of sexual ethics that God forbids, as if Scripture and the Spirit who inspired them could be kind of set against each other.

The other is a church that believes that all things that pertain to our salvation in this life and the next are abundantly clear in Scripture, and so is prepared to leave behind certain church structures that have been so familiar and have given us so much, and yet move in a direction that may not be clear in every way.

Now, I'm not here to suggest that once we've embarked, by God's grace, on the road to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, that the dividing line between believers and non-believers is neat and tidy, because it isn't.

[5 : 53] But what I do hope we'll see this morning is how gracious God is in bringing his people, that remnant that he keeps for himself, to a place where we can begin afresh, where we can say that he's been faithful to his promise, and that he will show us the way ahead as we trust in him.

So in the weeks ahead, we'll be studying Ezra and Nehemiah. Really, it's one book, and it's my privilege while George has gone to get this study launched.

So before we look into Ezra 1, let me just remind you of the situation that God's people found themselves in at the time. Ever since Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, had carried many Judeans into Babylon, and then sometime later, in 586 B.C., destroyed Jerusalem and the temple there, God's people found themselves in captivity.

For centuries, they had experienced gradual decline. If they were thinking of their glory days, with David and Solomon, when they enjoyed, well, they enjoyed a clear national identity, they would have to be thinking about 400 years back.

To recall their entry into the land of Canaan, they had to go back another 400 years. And now in exile, where most of them had been born, prophets like Ezekiel reminded them of their homeland.

[7 : 37] And so did Psalm 137, which gave them these words. By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our lyres, for there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

And then is the reply, How, though, shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Now according to Daniel, himself an exiled prophet, God is a God who removes kings and sets up kings.

Daniel 2.11. I beg your pardon, 2.21. So it comes to pass in 538 B.C. that Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, King Belshazzar, is overthrown by the Persians and the Medes.

And Cyrus comes to power. What we need to know about Cyrus is that about 160 years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied that God would call and use him for his own purposes.

[8 : 54] Here's what the Lord had said to him through Isaiah in chapter 45, and verses 4 and 5. For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name.

I name you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. Besides me, there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me.

And then, jumping ahead, another about 110 years before the fulfillment of that prophecy, God says through Jeremiah, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

So that brings us to Ezra. So if you have that handy, whatever format, it would be great if you could just have an eye there on the first four verses that Jono read, verses 1 to 4 of Ezra 1.

Because I want to highlight four things that we wouldn't want to miss in this passage, in that decree of Cyrus. If we are ultimately trying to understand how God moved a people in the direction of Jerusalem, we need to know that God had first stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.

[10 : 27] And how did that come about? Well, we can't be sure what motivated Cyrus, humanly speaking. Maybe he was impressed with Isaiah's prophecy and wanted to show some regard for it.

Maybe he just wanted to show a more tolerant and enlightened view of things compared to his predecessors. The point here is this.

Whatever his personal motives, the text tells us that it was God actually at work, moving him. And the second detail to notice is that Cyrus, by speaking of Yahweh as the God of heaven, was apparently ready to acknowledge that there is one supreme God by whose authority he, Cyrus, now reigned over all the kingdoms of the earth.

Now, the new king wasn't necessarily boasting here. He had taken over the kingdoms that had belonged to Nebuchadnezzar. And according to Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar's reign reached to the ends of the earth.

So he was just repeating that, if you like. But the third thing to notice is that Cyrus did not know the living God in the way that the living God knew him, as Isaiah had prophesied.

[11 : 56] On the one hand, he acknowledged that it was his task to see that the house, that a house was built in Jerusalem. And so he proclaimed that the Jews were free to go do just that.

In fact, he put it in writing so that it could be disseminated throughout the land. At the same time, Cyrus took their God to be a territorial God.

The God who is in Jerusalem, as written in the decree. That's why one commentary sets this proclamation within the context of Cyrus' wider agenda that we can call his plan for the resettlement of foreign gods, PRFG.

With that policy, he allowed the gods of earlier conquerors to be taken back to their original lands. And in doing that, Cyrus had just one request.

He said, please, when you pray to your gods, ask them to ask my gods to give me long life.

[13 : 09] The fourth detail to notice is that while Cyrus remains a pagan, God still chooses to work through his policy, his enlightened policy on religious affairs, to speed the exiles on their way to Jerusalem.

He decrees that friends and neighbors, presumably, not just Jewish neighbors, but others, are to gather up treasures and provisions that the Jews will need for their journey.

then we come to verse 5, what I'm calling here the climax of the passage. I'll just read it again.

Then rose up the heads of the fathers houses of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.

I think I've chosen it as the theme verse. Well, let me explain. We're considering how God has been at work.

[14 : 15] He's prepared a way for a new order in the land with Cyrus now in charge. He's made use of a particular political agenda so that it favors his people, God's people.

And through means of his choosing, he has stirred up Cyrus' spirit to issue this proclamation of glad tidings and to see to it that it's enforced.

Now, he brings all this together with his chosen people's longing for their homeland, which he has also kept alive in them, incidentally, through means of his choosing.

Always means. And consider God's method in verse 5. First, he sets the face of some, the senior members of the houses of Judah and Benjamin towards Jerusalem.

Then he takes the priests and the Levites and he sets them behind them, as it were. And then he, finally, he, to that group, he adds many, many more, working in their hearts, a determination to follow where their political and religious leaders are taking them to go out like Abraham did so long ago.

[15 : 32] Well, the remaining verses tell us how God's promise did not lack his provision because the provisions were more than abundant and even Cyrus came forward at that point, didn't he?

Having done his own gathering about 50 years earlier, as I mentioned with Nebuchadnezzar, he didn't just take away the Judeans, he took away the precious things from the temple, all the temple vessels, gold and silver basins and bowls and so forth, and installed those in his own temple where they would have been used in the worship of idols.

And now Cyrus is saying, here, take them back, take them with you and may your God go with you. Let's think about working our way towards applying this passage to our own lives.

You might be asking, well, okay, so all the Jews packed up and left, didn't they? Well, if my sources are correct, only about one in six did. And they did that in three waves of emigration.

The first led by Zerubbabel or Zerubbabel would see to the rebuilding of the temple first. And then the second wave would get to see the law established with Ezra, the priest.

[17 : 04] And then the third wave led by Nehemiah the governor would see the city rebuilt and the walls. So why did so few, relatively speaking, leave?

Well, from a human side, we can assume several reasons. Group A would have been physically unable to make the journey. Someone in group B would have said, well, this is the world I know.

I've made my home here and I have people to care for. A member of group C might have said, if I leave, it's going to break up my family. And in any case, I can pray to God right here.

And we can imagine a group D, too. Members of this group would have been discouraged about the prospect of going to Jerusalem itself. The city was in ruins and held by enemies in any case.

and the journey ahead would be rough. And so if we ask, well, so was it wrong for them to stay behind?

[18 : 14] And here I think something that J.C. Ryle had to say can be helpful. In his sermon, A Call to Prayer, he wrote this, it is not absolutely needful to salvation that a person should read the Bible.

A person may have no learning or be blind and yet have Christ in their heart.

It is not absolutely needful that a person should hear public preaching of the gospel. They may live where the gospel is not preached, or they may be bedridden or deaf.

But the same thing cannot be said about prayer. It is absolutely needful to salvation that a person should pray. Now, applied to Ezra and Nehemiah's day, what I think Ryle would say here is that the exiles who remained in Babylon could still call out to the living God and be saved.

The logic is the same. It wasn't absolutely essential for them to get to Jerusalem. So the natural question would be, well, why go up to Jerusalem in that case?

[19 : 28] Well, hold that thought as I try to sum up what I think we've learned in the passage about God and his way of working. Now, the bullet point version would simply be this.

God speaks, God moves in human hearts, God directs, God provides and preserves what is his.

God speaks, God moves human hearts, God directs, God provides and preserves what is his. The first two of these remind us that God works through his word and spirit together.

From one side, God speaks. Notice how the passage gives priority to his word, that the word of the Lord might be fulfilled.

And what he has spoken, among other things, is a promise that he keeps. From the other side, the underside if you like, the side of the human heart, God moves within those hearts, stirring them up, stirring up even a pagan ruler to do his bidding.

[20 : 44] And other hearts to receive the promise and to take hold of it. And the second two also form a kind of pair. they express what we might call a doctrine of direction and provision.

That is, God directs, pointing his people to Jerusalem, and he says, go, and I'll go with you. And then from the other side, God provides what is needed for the journey and preserves what we'll need for the task that faces us.

Now, if we ask what holds all that together, well, we can say it's God's providence. I like Burkopf's definition, brief, succinct.

He says that divine providence is that work of God by which he preserves all his creatures, is active in all that transpires in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.

In other words, we can say that what moves the world along is not some impersonal principle force, but a personal, wise, and good God.

[21 : 56] What's remarkable is that the doctrine comes to focus in Jesus. That's because the writer to the Hebrews says that Christ upholds the universe by the word, by his word of power, Hebrews 1 and verse 3.

Now, that's a glorious doctrine that we can truly delight in. The reason is that it reminds us that God is working out his purposes right in the middle of human history.

He takes the real stuff of history, political movements, social realities, quirky motives that we bring, sadness by the waters of Babylon, all of it.

He takes all of it and he bends it towards the fulfillment of his plan. To do what? Well, to sum up all things in Christ and to bring all things under his authority.

Now, in the midst of that, he knows who belongs to him because both the call that stirs up spirits and the reason why some spirits are stirred while others aren't are in his hands.

[23 : 09] The timing of all of it remains with him and not us. Our duty is simply spelled out there in Psalm 97. Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart.

Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart. So, with that, I think we can come back to that question. Why the need to get to Jerusalem if God's people can call on him anywhere?

dogma. Well, in our own day of stirring towards that new beginning in the global church, why the need to leave behind structures where we've been baptized, catechized, nurtured, if it's still possible to call on God from within them?

Here I'm reminded how even John Calvin, the great reformer, wrote that the Babylon of his day, the papacy, insofar as it stood in opposition to God's word contain God's people still, if in a hidden way. And the flip side is surely true.

What I mean is that at some point or another, some Jews would have just gone along for the ride, so to speak. And even once in Jerusalem, and this is probably even more to the point, we'll see in the weeks ahead that the leaders were going to face challenges not only from outside God's household, but from within it, as some would show with their lifestyles and with their actions, how much their hearts were still in exile.

[24 : 50] By the same token, it's very likely in our day that some will publicly identify with the new beginning in the global Christian movement, coming out of churches that have undermined central truths of the gospel, as we believe, or attaching themselves to these new emerging movements, while their hearts and minds won't be tuned to God's word and promise. And yet, and yet, I think we need to say this. The one fundamental reason why you or I should come out of a structure in which grave error has entered the citadel, as Calvin put it, is that God has stirred our heart to do it.

That's the basic reason. The passage itself gives us tools for discernment of that reason, but that's the fundamental reason. So how to, and what, the rest of what I want to share with you, I want to share orientation principles that I think are in our text to help us discern just that.

I call them orientation principles because they relate to how we look to the future, how we look to the past, and how we think about our present. In the first place, Ezra 1 teaches us how to look ahead, how to fix our eyes on God's promise. In the light of the New Testament, the new Jerusalem we long for, the city of the great king is there. It's there, and it's coming.

The beauty and glory of that truth was something I desperately needed to hear and to be reminded of one day when I was wandering in a kind of spiritual fog as a graduate student, a few years back, I won't tell you how many. I happened to wander into the recording section of the library at the University of British Columbia where I was studying, and I picked out a record at random from the gospel collection.

You remember those recording sections used to have those old vinyl records. And I played that song, somehow I came to play the song, We're Marching to Zion.

[27 : 18] You probably know the words. Beautiful, beautiful Zion. Maybe it was something about the beauty that captured me, I don't know. But I can really say that the words, those simple words, stirred my heart.

So I actually walked out of that library somehow with new hope. And if that stirring was from God, and I trust that it was, it was because it came purely from his mercy. It represented the start of a new beginning as I could stop looking within to my own resources for direction and for confidence about my own sense of direction, but rather with Abraham to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God, as Hebrews 11.10 puts it.

And it represented the birth of a new longing for truth in me, together with holiness. A passion that I believe God increases in our hearts. He works in our hearts as we remain by his grace on that road to Zion.

A second thing that our passage teaches us is how to look to the past with the same grateful hearts. I just want to share, speaking for myself again, that I'm not the greatest example here on looking to the past. Because by temperament, I think I might have spoken about my dad here from this pulpit before. Well, anyway, he is the kind of fellow who, well, I'm not at all like him.

And he, because he's the kind of fellow who's always, as long as I can remember, always pressing toward the finish line, which is an apt metaphor for him because, well, he was an expert half mile runner when he was a student at Mississippi State University. I thought he probably could have gone to the Olympics. I don't know. And I'm one, by contrast, who tends to dwell in the past. I don't know. Maybe you're like me. I don't know. If given a chance, I'm really one of those who tries to find a way to relive past moments that I think are worth reliving. That's just the way I seem to be wired.

[29 : 45] But by vocation, as a presbyter, of course, I'm supposed to be out in front, right? I'm supposed to be out in front leading the way to Jerusalem. But by temperament, I'm more comfortable sticking around in Babylon. And I know this because growing up, I was part of a group called Operation Mobilization. How many of you have heard of it? Okay. Several of you have heard of it. Well, the leader of that organization, just as a footnote, he died two days ago. And he and my father were roommates back in their time in Bible college. And so all to say Operation Mobilization, which has this kind of militaristic sound and also the mobilized part. Well, for the life of me, I could not figure out or come to terms with the mobilized part. My relatives in Mississippi or Arkansas would have said, with the cotton pickin' mobilized part. I wondered, why is the Christian life all about going somewhere? And we did seem to always be pulling up stakes. Maybe that trained me for scouting.

As a partial cure to my nostalgic temperament, I found something C.S. Lewis wrote very helpful. I don't remember the exact words, but the idea was basically this. If we find ourselves longing for the past, what we're actually longing for was a particular future that we were looking forward to in that moment. A particular future we were leaning into, if you like, in that moment. So what that means, I think, is that it's not the naked moment itself that would satisfy us, even if we could have it.

The rest of the cure, if you like, comes from the reminder of God's providence, as we see here in Ezra 1. God has brought us where we are, rescuing us from enslavement to sin, giving us a new start.

And since he transcends all our moments, even while holding them all in his hand, we can leave it to him to gather up, gather them all up, and make and give them meaning. Maybe it's a little bit like this. As long as we look ahead, fixing our eyes on Jesus, our past can be truly meaningful, because it's only in light of the future that we see something of how God was working in past moments to draw us to himself, like that moment in the library, maybe. Well, in the third place, we can take from Ezra 1 an orientation principle that helps us to think about the present moment. And under this third heading, if you'll forgive me, I have three very brief points in conclusion. It's always having third point, three points, but it's not that complicated. This is my last point, and it has three brief sub-points. In the first place, it's only because past and future are real that the present makes any sense at all.

Now, the Buddha was alive when, roughly, when the time we're talking about was happening, and there is, in kind of a Buddhist-inspired popular thought, the idea that we should just learn to live in the present moment. After all, the future and the past are to be thought of as illusions.

[33 : 41] What matters is that we live in the eternal now, where we learn to make our roads as we walk them. As we think of that poem from Antonio Machado, the road is made as you walk it. But in the light of Ezra 1, we can be confident that the journey between here and the new Jerusalem isn't one that we have to make up as we go along. And why is that? Well, it's precisely because Jesus himself has already made that road. We have a real road to walk on, and it leads to where he is.

And in the second place, we can think about that journey as a real means of grace. As a real means of grace. Sometimes we're inclined to think of that first journey that the Judeans made to Jerusalem as a mere type and shadow of what was to come. Well, and in light of its fulfillment, of course, it was a type and shadow of the journey to the city that is yet to come. But for those who were moved by God's Spirit to go, it was nothing less than a means of grace, the instrument God had chosen to keep us, to keep them in his care, as he does with us today as we remain in prayer, as we hear God's word, as we celebrate the sacraments in the life of the church.

So I think it's the same with us today, and I think I will try to be bold saying this, as we work towards a regathered and restored Anglican communion, where we can be confident that the pure word of God is proclaimed, and where with David we can learn to behold the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple.

And finally, as we follow where God leads, we can trust that he'll provide and preserve what's his. We can trust that the decisions and actions of our political leaders are not out of his control.

We can be thankful, too, for our elders in the faith and pray that they, too, will stick to their main task. And along with the provision of leaders, we can also trust that God will provide for our physical needs.

[36 : 16] But he also preserves what's his, as he did with those temple vessels. What is that precisely? Well, what belongs to him are his statutes, his ordinances, his testimonies, his word, in short.

And he promises that his word will accomplish what he has purposed for it, Isaiah 55, 11. So even after periods of neglect or even abuse, which is not beyond even a reformation movement, we constantly, this need to be ongoing reformation.

So even after periods of neglect and abuse of God's word, as it happens naturally in Babylon, there comes a day when God stirs up hearts afresh, causing us to pray that he'll send his word with power once again.

Now, in light of that, I can't think of a more fitting closing prayer than what we find in Psalm 43 and verse 3.

So I'm going to pray that as a concluding prayer. Amen. Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me.

[37 : 40] Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.