

The Remnant Rescued

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Preacher: James Lapping

[0 : 0 0] Brilliant. Cheers, Sarah. You did amazingly well there. And if any of you are watching at home or in the house tonight and you feel a bit ripped off because we skipped that middle section, the good news is it's repeated in Nehemiah 7, which we'll get to in a couple of weeks.

Hooray! We might ask you to read it then. What a joy. Well, great. Well, welcome. Lovely to see you.

Thank you, Simon. And thank you, Matthew. Did you know Matthew was singing lead soloist this morning at our 9 a.m. service? What a great privilege and service you've done there, Matthew.

Exceedingly grateful, bro, to Simon and to others for your hard work. And if you're watching at home, a big warm welcome to you. And it's a particularly pants Christmas, isn't it?

Am I allowed to say that? Is pants a bad word? Good word? I'm not sure. It's been really, really bad. We thought it was going to get good, and then it got even worse.

[1 : 0 6] And if you've been watching the news today, Boris has said it's even going to get more worse than it is at the moment. And I wonder, what is your touchstone when things go really bad in life?

What's that magic verse that you go to in the Bible, that you read, that will give you comfort when things are really tough? I'll give you a moment just to think, maybe chat to your friend if you're with a friend.

Chat to them, maybe chat at home. What's that verse that you'll go to in the Bible? So just think about that. What's that thing that you're going to trust in if you aren't really a big Bible person?

great so let's pray as we look at Ezra 1 and 2 tonight so in Jeremiah God writes this is what the Lord says when the 70 years are complete for Babylon I will come to you and I will fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place for I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord plans to prosper you not to harm you plans to give you hope and a future then you'll call on me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you

I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you the place declares the Lord and I will bring you back to the place for which I carried you into exile Lord you have a plan you always act your best help us to hear and listen to that plan tonight help us not to make our plans your plan but please make your plans our plan Amen and Ezra chapter 1 is really an entry into the darkest moment in Israel's history the people have been entirely wiped out and they've been carried off by the Babylonians into exile and the reason for that is they've given up on listening to God they've given up on reading the Bible but in our reading tonight we read that although the people had given up on God God has not given up on them and what do we read chapter 1 verse 1 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 the realm written and writing and that word is that word that we know and love from Jeremiah that we comfort ourselves when things are really bad from Jeremiah 29 verse 10 and 11 you see those words of comfort were originally written to the people in Ezra's day when they were at their worst

[4 : 32] I'll give you a quick background to Ezra we remember that right at the start of the Bible we're in the garden we've got a people a place in the garden of Eden and it's wonderful but then something goes wrong and the people sin and they're outside the garden but then there's this promise given to Abraham that God is going to give Abraham and his descendants a people a place and they're going to go there and we see how they go there with King David and Solomon and it's amazing but then things go wrong and they go away into exile and here we're at this middle peak here where they'll come out of exile and they've returned back to the land God's people but this is kind of the saddle between the great peak of coming back from Exodus and that future peak of when Jesus will return and bring us into that heavenly place and that heavenly kingdom and Ezra and Nehemiah they're really two books that are one book they are really two books that form one book they're originally written on one scroll as it were so they should be read together and so we're going to look at them together over the next couple of weeks and they span a time period of 110 years and they really are written as the last almost the last books in the Old Testament what we see in them is we see three cycles of three rulers who princes who call God's people back to God's place back to the land so firstly we see

Zerubbabel underneath this chap Sheshbazar that we just about managed to say in Ezra 1 to 6 and he's all about rebuilding the altar and rebuilding the temple in God's land and then in Ezra chapter 7 and 10 we meet Ezra finally and he's all about the religious reform of the people and then thirdly we'll see the last cycle of return and restoration in Nehemiah and that's the book of Nehemiah that we know and love that we hear so often about Nehemiah who builds the city walls and each of these cycles there's initial great excitement and then there's conflict and opposition and then there is a rather ambiguous resolution and these events are very real you can go to the British Museum today and you can go and look at a cylinder that was written by King Cyrus all those years ago so this is history that we're looking at but it's history with a purpose

Ezra wants us to understand something that thing that he wants us to understand I'm going to have a punt is God's hand in restoring his people to worship him according to his promise that's the big thing that God is doing in the world and so we're going to look at chapter 1 and chapter 2 tonight and chapter 1 we're really going to see God at his best and then chapter 2 we're going to see God's people at their best and the people at the start of Ezra they're really in a great darkness and we've thought about that how they were in exile and the things that caused them going to exile weren't casual sins but they were a deep dark rejection of God entirely they were in a deep darkness so much so that the pagans around them at that time when they looked at them at God's people in those days they were shocked by them and so God sent them into exile as a punishment for their sin and there's complete abandonment complete rejection by God of his people but the greater shock that we read about at the very start of this passage and should really hit us like a thunderclap is what God does in stirring the heart of Cyrus to send his people back and moving the heart of his people the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia and so we should read verse 1 really as you might imagine you opened up the paper tomorrow and Boris said all restrictions are lifted

COVID is over it's that kind of relief that you should have when you approach Ezra chapter 1 verse 1 that might have been a small taste of what the people might have felt when this proclamation was made it was an absolute joy absolute restoration and so what we see here in chapter 1 is God at his best who totally and undeservedly out of his great kindness restores his people he brings them back to him he moves the king's heart in verse 1 and then later in verse 5 we read how God moves the heart of every then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin the priests of the Levites everyone whose heart God had moved God moves the hearts of his people and it's a salvation and a rescue that comes from nowhere so before coming to Glasgow

I worked at a church in London and there was this chap there Mo and Mo was Iranian you'd guess that from his name and his name was short for Mohammed and he'd come over to London to escape all the horrors there and he became a Christian through the ministry of friends at church he was a Christian from nowhere how on earth did he become a Christian he changed his name to Moses when he got baptized it was the most amazing baptism then we think of Joel Simeon who was a great preacher down south years and years ago he did not know another Bible believing Christian for the first three years of his Christian life he became a Christian from absolutely nowhere God saved him and he became a great preacher he preached the word and this salvation that we see here this rescue here is God at his best

[11:08] God moving the heart of King Cyrus and moving the hearts of his people out of his great love for them but why why does God do this why does God move in Cyrus' heart like this well just in case you missed it Ezra repeats why God does this time and again in chapter 1 it's almost in every verse I wonder if you spotted it so it's in verse 2 verse 3 verse 4 verse 5 verse 7 implicitly in verse 9 and 11 why has God acted like this why has God brought about this great rescue that they may go and rebuild the temple to fulfill the word of Jeremiah and it's my suspicion that when you've seen those postcards of Jeremiah 29 verse 11 your first instinct is not to think about the temple but what he means here is that the temple is a symbol of God's presence with his people

God acts like this to draw God back to himself to draw God's people back to himself so what is it going to look like for those words of Jeremiah to be real in my life to be real in your life what's it going to look like for God to have a plan to be acting the best in your life and the answer is not a house in Mulgai and it's not more wild swimming and it's not more Monroe bagging and it's not marrying Mr. and Mrs. Wright and it's not having that dream job but it's to have God at the center of your life as the rightful king to draw near to God in worship and the thing that Ezra wants to do and why Ezra is such a wonderful book to be reading is that he wants you to feel the joy and comfort of Jeremiah 29 and verse 11 of drawing near to

God and trusting in his promises and God says this and Ezra says this is God at his best this is why you want God in your life because this is the type of God that he is he brings a rescue from nowhere so growing up in South Africa I 91 we had this big referendum Scott's love referendums don't they and we had this referendum about whether we were going to continue with peaceful negotiations or whether we were going to give them up about reforming South Africa and resort to a route of violence and lo and behold out of nowhere came Nelson Mandela and the thing that made him so significant was he literally came from nowhere and he brought reconciliation for his enemies he taught peace for his enemies it was an amazing rescue that came from nowhere that was totally undeserved but

Ezra he writes about this great rescue there at that time in his day but he's got half an eye on that greater rescue in the future so I wonder if you've been out climbing I know we're technically not allowed to but maybe you've wandered up a hill somewhere and you know how it is when you go walking you get to the first ridge and you think you're there and in Ezra we're kind of on that first ledge but the peak of the hill is way in the future and it's that great peak of that greater rescue of King Jesus of who we remembered at Jesus at Christmas and Ezra is pointing to that greater salvation that comes from nowhere that will come 400 500 years later than when he is writing these words when Jesus will die for his enemies people who hated him people like you and me and he'll bring them to glory he'll bring them into God's presence that they may know and worship him

God at his best utterly undeserved and well we've seen in chapter 1 we see God at his best and now we're going to look at God's people at their best what it's going to look like for us to be a people who are moved to love a God like this and they will pick up three things that are marked by the first thing is that they are people who worship God and then we're going to look at how there are people that are concerned about purity and then finally we're going to briefly look at their generosity and the most amazing thing about chapter 2 is really that and chapter 1 of Ezra is that anyone actually bothered turning up you see life was clearly very good in Babylon although Ezra talks about them being in captivity there's no mention of hostility at the start of Ezra in chapter 2 in verse 68 we read about how people are able to offer free will offerings and gifts they clearly had been making a good wage in

[16 : 42] Babylon and the question is why did these people although they had life that was so good why did they bother leaving Babylon and going back to Jerusalem going back to God's place they had clearly given up on God God was a distant memory for them they were part of a rich and prosperous empire why would they go back to that bomb shelter of a town like Jerusalem and for many of us we in one sense we are living in Babylon and we're tempted to settle and stay in Babylon life is very good in Glasgow here's James Forsyth a political pundit on G11 it says close to heaven as you can get I wish I was there now maybe during lockdown God's gone a bit on the back burner we're not as excited about

God as we are maybe we've been persuaded by what our friends say and we think what they say seems very impressive all the new ideas that are coming out those things seem very important keeping up with the latest political ideas and trends those seem like the thing why would I jeopardize all of that to follow Christ more wholeheartedly why would leave leave G11 and go live in Calton for the sake of Christ and for lots of us we may be living in Partic and we may be sitting here but mentally and spiritually our dress is still in Babylon and why leave the first thing that we notice is that the people come up they come out of Babylon not because they're forced to but because God has moved in their hearts verse 5 and we've looked at that briefly everyone whose heart

God has moved God has called them back he wants them to be his people he wants them to be devoted to him in worship God has miraculously broken into their hearts into the heart numbingly spiritually blinding comfort of Babylon and he's prompted them to leave God has promised them a rescue to rescue his people from themselves God has a plan and he's going to be true to his promises so spiritually I don't know where we may be tonight I can see that you are here physically and I'm trusting that you're at home sitting on the couch with a cup of tea and I know you're sitting there but where are you spiritually I don't really know that do I in a sense I can get to know a bit vaguely but I don't know exactly can I ask you won't you be open to God moving in your heart tonight this week in 2021 going forward to make a change to come out of

Babylon to make Christ the centre of your life to be one of his people in his land and the miracle in Israel is that God has moved in the hearts of his people to bring them to worship to have God at the centre of their hearts and lives to hear God's word to have God's spirit move within them in accordance with his promises and so just look at the end of verse 5 there if you've got your Bible open come out and be prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord that they might have God at the centre of their hearts and lives they leave Babylon they don't know what's waiting for them they don't know what's coming but they want to go and worship God one of my favourite missionaries and we heard that wonderful story from

Susie earlier was a rather obscure missionary Lillias Trotter does anyone know Lillias Trotter here no hands no she was a missionary to Algeria and she went as an 18 year old to Algeria and the thing about Lillias why I enjoy her is she used to do these watercolours in her diary every day and they stunningly beautiful and she was this stunningly talented artist and John Ruskin the greatest artist English artist of the 19th century tutored Lillias Trotter and he said if you stay in Britain you will be the greatest artist England has ever produced and artists in those days are a bit like rock stars today I've got a friend whose granddad was one of these great granddad was one of these artists and he's still living large off the wages this chap made 150 years later these guys were really big and Lillias Trotter she was going to be the top of the path but she left it and she went to

[22 : 01] Algeria as a youngster to tell people there the gospel she went there to worship God as a spiritual act of worship the next thing that we notice is that the people are their best in being concerned about purity they go to worship God in Jerusalem but there's this concern to practically work out what that is going to look like and there's a concern for purity there and so if we just look there in 61 62 we see in the list that we've skipped over all the different aspects of temple worship are covered in that list they've made sure that there's people from every aspect of the temple to do God's work and there when they're unsure of whether someone has the right credentials of whether they are of true blood at that time remember to be a true Israelite you still had to be of blood heritage although later in Ezra Nehemiah we're going to see that all people are included in God's people but they are careful to not just include anyone automatically they want to make sure are you the right person are you qualified are you suitably ritually pure to be to help with this great endeavor they're saying let's go worship

God but how do we do that let's try and get things right let's not rush and let's ask God and so there's that mention there of Urim and Thummim and that was the way that the Israelites in those days would go and approach God and ask God what was the thing to do in tricky situations and so they were concerned about purity and so as we come out as we seek to worship God as we seek to be a people concerned about God the message of the gospel is a call to purity living pure lives living the way that God wants us to and not our own way to bring God to bear on how I do every day of my life how I live my life in every aspect and covers every aspect of my life and so the people are at that best when they are concerned about purity and then finally in verses 68 and 69 we see this amazing generosity of the people

I don't know what a derrick is in verse 69 according to the ability they gave to the treasury for this work that's the work of building the temple of free will offerings in the house of God 61,000 derricks of gold I don't know what a derrick is but I'm pretty sure it's a lot 5,000 miners of silver and 100 priestly garments there's this uppouring of generosity to God's temple because they want to worship God they're amazingly generous so having their hearts stirred by God carefully to live in God's way they are moved into a stunning generosity as their spiritual act of worship and the people give their best for God because they see that God gives their best for them they see that God has a plan a plan to bring them back to him but rather than being a chore this is a joy to have God at the center of their lives see sometimes we think that if I put God at the center of my life then I have to give up so much

I have to give up all the things that I want when the reality is what God gives us far outstrips anything that we could ever give the people are generous because at the heart of gospel there's God's stunning generosity to us notice how the hand of God has moved us moved in this passage out of his great love and generosity for his people just notice how God moves the heart of Cyrus he gives a decree to the returning exiles in chapter 1 verse 4 and then he makes and then we see that all the neighbors in verse 6 all the neighbors assisted them and they give lots of things and then we see later in chapter 6 we read how Cyrus actually funds all the work of the building the temple God is amazingly generous he provides these funds from absolutely nowhere and it reminds you of how the people came out of Egypt all those years ago how God brought them out laden with the treasures of Egypt and if

God's generosity was astounding in Ezra's day and when the people came out of Egypt then what about us when we see this full extent of God's kindness and generosity at the cross of Christ we see the same overwhelming undeserved generosity at the cross where Jesus the son of God king of the universe lays it aside and dies for us for people who hated us hated him to bring us to God the message of the gospel is about a God who turns the most stunning darkness the most stunning darkness of defeats in life and turns it into the most stunning victory so that you wonder how did God do that how did he bring that about the gospel is all about God at its best and the gospel asks God's people to be their best

[27 : 48] God has a plan that plan is for us to be a people who turn to him in trust and obedience who place him at the center of their lives not out of duty but out of joy at the stunning generosity and kindness of God the Father let's pray as we close so Father we thank you that you have a plan we thank you that at the cross in Jesus we see you at your best we see your kindness on a people who've rejected you we see the riches of your grace and kindness poured out on us we thank you that we can read about how you've done that in the past for the people in Ezra's and Zerubbabel's day we thank you that we'll see that in the future when we come into that heavenly land into that heavenly temple in heaven amen

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