



“Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:2).

The World in His Hands

Central Truth: God is in control of all people and all nations.

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Topic: Israel: Captivity of; God: Sovereignty of; Prophecy.

Behold the miracle of fulfilled prophecy! There is no Bible truth which magnifies more the sovereignty of God over men and nations than the fact of fulfilled prophecy. *“Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure . . . yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it”* (Isaiah 46:9-11).

There are many prophecies recorded in Holy Scripture which were fulfilled in exact detail as they were predicted. Few are as impressive as that prophecy and fulfillment recorded in Isaiah 45 and Ezra 1. The nature of that prophecy is so unusual that men who hesitate to accept the fulfillment of predictive prophecy insist that the prediction in Isaiah must have been written after the event in Ezra. The person who is convinced of the certainty of fulfilled prophecy will have no problem accepting it as the Bible says. God is able to plan and perform, purpose and do, announce and execute.

The Isaiah-prediction and the Ezra fulfillment is unusual in several ways. (1) The time between prediction and fulfillment was approximately one and one-half centuries. (2) The ruler by whose decree the prophecy would be fulfilled was called by name that far in advance. (3) The prophecy told of the action of a pagan ruler who did not recognize in worship the God of Judah. (4) The prediction was fulfilled in exact detail as it was declared.

Such a wonderful prediction and fulfillment magnifies the sovereignty of our God.

I. PREDICTION

Isaiah lived in troublesome times for Judah. His prophetic ministry covered the reign of four kings. Two times he saw revival, and two times he saw apostasy. Jotham led a revival which was counteracted by the apostasy of Ahab. Hezekiah led a revival which was followed by gross apostasy under Manasseh. Isaiah knew the nation could not stand when she was so unstable in her spiritual life. From the reign of Manasseh onward, the doom of Judah was sealed.

In chapters 1 through 39 of his book, Isaiah called the nation to repentance. Finally, it was too late to repent. Judgment was coming. Nothing could change it. So in chapter 40 and onward, Isaiah wrote to console and assure the suffering nation that God had not deserted her. It is in that "Book of Consolation" that Isaiah speaks of Cyrus.

How could Isaiah predict God's actions one and one-half centuries before it happened? How could he even name the pagan king who would be God's agent in doing His will? The answer to those questions is found in Amos 3:7, "*Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.*" God revealed to Isaiah that which He had determined to do.

Why did God reveal such future events so far in advance? (1) He pointed out the consequences of sin on a nation. (2) He warned so as to restrain men from further rebellion. (3) He revealed the faithfulness of God when the prediction came to pass. (4) He stirred faith in the sovereignty of the God of Judah who can purpose and perform all His will. (5) He gave a message to every generation that God is in control of all the nations of the earth.

What divine purpose lay behind the prophecy? (1) God purposed to use the nation Israel as the instrument of His revelation to mankind and to send the Messiah through her. (2) God used the nation of Babylon as a scourge to discipline Israel for her sins. (3) God purposed only to purge, not to destroy, the Jews because His purpose was not yet fulfilled in them. (4) God used the Medo-Persian Empire to overthrow the Babylonian Empire (to

which the Jews had been in captivity) in order to return the Jews to Palestine. (5) In their Promised Land, God purposed to continue His work among the Jews and to give Jesus to the world through them.

What is God's relationship to a pagan ruler and his nation? (1) He called Cyrus His “anointed.” That term was used to describe the kings of Judah, and it was applied in a very special sense to the Messiah. And God applied that term to a pagan king! It meant that Cyrus was chosen of God to perform a special part in the plan of God for the Jews. (2) He gave Cyrus and his armies victory over all nations to make them masters of the world. (3) His work in Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire was for the sake of the chosen nations by which He was giving the divine revelation and through which He would give the Savior. (4) God used Cyrus for His purpose at a time when the pagan ruler did not know He even existed. That is the sovereignty of Him whom we call “Father” in Jesus Christ! How long was it from the prediction to the fulfillment? Isaiah's prediction came sometime before the year 700 B.C. The fulfillment came to pass in the decree of Cyrus issued in 536 B.C. What a miracle!

Jeremiah clarified even further the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah said that Judah would be disciplined for her sins; Jeremiah said the discipline would be a seventy-year captivity. Both prophets agreed the captivity would end when God visited His people and punished their captors (Isaiah 45; Jeremiah 25:11; 12; 29:10; 33:7). Isaiah went a step beyond Jeremiah in naming the ruler by whose decree the people could return to Palestine from their Babylonian captivity.

II. FULFILLMENT

How did God begin in the fulfillment of His promise through His prophets? The first step was to bring Cyrus to the throne of Persia. (Persia is now known as Iran.) At that time, Persia was a second-rate country and not at all a world power. But then the purpose of God was fulfilled by victorious conquests of the Persian armies. Finally, the once-great Babylonian Empire fell to the Persian forces. (Do you remember the feast of Belshazzar, the handwriting on the wall, and the interpretation of the writing by Daniel? That was the occasion.) Thus God brought Cyrus to a place where he was ruler over the dispossessed people of Judah.

What human motivation caused Cyrus to permit the Jews to return to their homeland? God gave him a different philosophy of how to govern a conquered people. The Babylonians had followed a “scorched earth” policy. They destroyed the land and deported the people. Cyrus, on the contrary,

held that a happy people were less likely to cause a rebellion. He permitted all conquered people (not Jews only) to return to their homeland, reestablish their former way of life, renew their religion, and largely govern themselves. Their only obligation was to submit to his rule over them and to pray for the welfare of his empire.

What a lesson that teaches about the sovereign work of God among the nations of the world! Review what He did. (1) He gave the Persians victory over the Babylonians in order to remove Babylonian authority from over the Jews. (2) He placed the Jews under the authority of the Persians, who were much more lenient toward their captives. (3) He put it in the heart of Cyrus to permit conquered people to return to their own land, that the Jews might be permitted to return. (4) He caused Cyrus to permit people to rebuild their religious sanctuaries in order that the Jews might rebuild their temple. That is the way God blesses many because of the blessing of His own special people. (Remember how God blessed the house of Potiphar in Egypt because of the presence of Joseph?)

God is God of the whole world, not just the Jews or Christians. His presence and power were acknowledged in ancient times by many pagan kings including Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:46, 47), Darius (Daniel 6:26-28), and Cyrus (Ezra 1:2) — Babylonian as well as Persian monarchs.

How did Cyrus learn God's will concerning the return of the Jews to Palestine? The Bible does not say. There is an ancient tradition that the prophet Daniel, then a very old man, showed the prophecy of Isaiah wherein Cyrus was named as God's anointed to effect the restoration. The king was so impressed that he obeyed God. The tradition is unproven, of course, but it is evident the king felt that he was obeying God in his action. God said concerning Cyrus, *“He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid”* (Isaiah 44:28). Cyrus responded, *“The Lord God of heaven hath . . . charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah”* (Ezra 1:2).

Cyrus was a great king, ruler over all the nations of the earth at that time. He knew there was something unusual about his rise to power and his almost universal authority over mankind. Gradually it came to his mind that an even greater King than he, the Lord God of heaven, was behind his personal elevation. He submitted to the authority of the God of heaven.

What was the attitude of the Jews toward their freedom to return to Palestine? Surprisingly, thousands did not wish to leave Babylon. They were well off in their “captivity.” They were captives only in the sense that they could not return to their homeland. They were free to enter business, own

property, hold offices in the government, and enjoy all the freedoms of other citizens. Their privileges in Babylon were so great that many did not wish to return to the problems of re-establishing their nation in Palestine.

Some of the Jews were resolved to return to the land of their fathers. They returned at three different migrations, just as they had been deported in three groups.

In 536 B.C. a prince of the house of David named Zerubbabel led 42,360 of the Jews back to Judea. They took with them 7,337 servants plus hundreds of animals, indicating the wealth they had accumulated in their "captivity." (It is significant that the first return in 536 B.C. was exactly seventy years after the first deportation in 606 B.C. as had been predicted by the prophet Jeremiah.) A second group was led by Ezra, a priest and scribe of the law of God, in 458 B.C. Yet a third migration was led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C.

There was a total time period of ninety-two years from the first deportation of Jews into Babylon to the last return to Palestine. That raises a problem of how to relate the prophecy of Jeremiah (that the captivity would last seventy years) to the fulfillment. (1) It was seventy years from the first deportation to the first return — 606 B.C. to 536 B.C. (2) It was seventy years from the destruction of the temple at the third deportation to the dedication of the new temple — 586 B.C. to 516 B.C. God's time-table is always exact. He speaks and brings it to pass as He said.

Today's study should have a profound effect on the person who understands. (1) There should be a sense of awe before the God of the whole universe. He works among nations as easily as among men. He moves one nation and then another to the world scene, all the while exercising His will and working His purpose in the world of mankind. That is not difficult, for He is greater than all nations.

(2) There must be a sense of assurance that He who controlled the nations in centuries passed is in charge today. Things are not out of hand. A divine purpose is being worked out in human history. God is in control of all men and nations of men.

1. How does Isaiah 46:9-11 summarize today's study?
2. What is the time period involved in the lesson?
3. How does Amos 3:7 explain predictive prophecy?
4. What was Isaiah's relationship with restoration from captivity?
5. What did God promise through Isaiah regarding restoration?
6. How did God bring Isaiah's prophecy to pass?

7. How does the study teach the sovereignty of God over nations?
8. How does the lesson apply to nations today?
9. What sense of assurance does that give you?
10. How does the study lead one to the spirit of Psalm 95:6, 7?