

God and His Church

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of July 2004.

The preacher is Peter Adam. His sermon is entitled God and His Church and is based on Ezra chapter 1 verses 1 to 11.

Let's pray together. Lord God we thank you that you use the same words in scripture to encourage and comfort and challenge generations of believers. And we thank you that these very words from Ezra chapter 1 have performed that function, your gracious goodwill in believers all the time from Ezra and Nehemiah's day until now.

So please use these words and work out your good purpose in each one of us and in us as your people we pray.

In Jesus name. Amen. Well the wonderful thing about the Bible is that it's so honest about life being a bit of a mess.

[1 : 15] Because that's exactly the situation that the people of God are found in in Ezra chapter 1. You can tell it from the first words of the book of Ezra in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia.

Because if you know your Bibles well you'll know that previously dates were given by kings of Judah and kings of Israel. These were David's descendants and the reign of a king marked a certain era.

But what's happened to the people of God? Why they've been turfed out of Jerusalem off to exile in Babylon. Their kings have been killed off.

Jerusalem has been destroyed. And the temple razed to the ground. And I love the Bible because it describes people in a mess.

And you could get no greater mess than the people of God at this particular time. It was the first year of Cyrus. One of the heroes of the ancient world. There was no king in Jerusalem.

[2 : 23] The people of God weren't in Jerusalem. There was no temple, no house of God in Jerusalem. In fact there was no Jerusalem. All God's people were in exile in Babylon.

And that marked not just the failure of the church of the Old Testament. But also the triumph of the world. And the judgment of God. It wasn't just that the people were in a difficult time and this was a very stressful time.

No, the reason they were in exile was because God had judged them. God had cast them out of Jerusalem, out of the land, away into exile. It wasn't just that life was difficult and a few things had gone wrong.

It was that their God was against them and not for them. And if you're the people of God and God is against you, your God is against you, then you're in great difficulty indeed.

Well, is Ezra chapter 1 a useful message for the people of God today all around the world?

[3 : 28] Why? Yes, I think it is. Why? We do read about good things happening and our missionaries feel a great deal of pressure to send us good news about what's happening overseas.

But let's think about church life in Australia. Is it going well or is it going badly? Well, there are some good churches around the place.

But you'd have to say that our churches are not packed full of worshippers and that the Christian church hasn't done very well in working class and welfare class areas of Melbourne.

You'd have to say the Christian church hasn't done a great deal of work with the countless Muslims who've arrived in Melbourne. Lots of work to do. Our public profile is not very high.

In fact, I recently saw an advertisement of a Roman priest with some young people on a billboard and I thought that doesn't look very good because the reputation of the church is so bad now that, well, you don't trust clergy, do you?

[4 : 36] In fact, a Roman priest who's a friend of mine said that when he goes to Dublin now he doesn't wear his clerical collar because he gets spat on in the streets. And if the church has a bad public profile then you might say inside there are difficulties.

Heresy, apathy, legalism and hypocrisy. Well, you might say that's just the church in the West but surely the two-thirds world church is going rather well. We hear good news of revival and under persecution people must get stronger as believers.

Well, that's not always the case, I'm afraid. Sometimes persecution weakens the church and doesn't strengthen it. Please don't think that a church under persecution will be a church in good shape.

And indeed, looking around the world today, I think you could say that in a way the church has failed in the West the world has triumphed and perhaps it is because we are under the judgment of God.

And if God is against us there is no help for us at all. But if the Bible faces us with a bleak situation the Bible also brings us substantial words of hope.

[5 : 55] For what could be more hopeful than the first verse of the book Ezra? In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished the Lord stood up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also in written edict declared The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah and any of those among you who are of his people are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem and Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord the God of Israel.

See Babylon had been the superpower and Babylon's policy was to bring everybody they captured into Babylon and bring everybody into headquarters so he can iron them.

When the Persians took over the Babylonian Empire they had exactly the opposite policy. Their policy was to send all their captives back to their own land and the people of God benefited from that policy.

Notice how carefully it's worded. For we find in verse 1 both the word of God and the power of God. Why were the people sent back from Babylon to Jerusalem?

The answer is in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished. That is by God's word by God's direction the people were taken off into exile by the word of God they were brought back from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem.

[7 : 28] But we find in verse 1 not only God's word through the prophet Jeremiah the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah we also find that the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus and if you look at verse 5 you'll see that the Lord not only stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus but also stirred up the spirit of the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin the priests and the Levites to get them ready to go and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

So you have not only the word of God the purposeful word of God the powerful word of God but also the power of God achieving the word of God.

In order to see what a great miracle this is just remember the words of the people in Ezekiel chapter 37 that great vision of the valley of dry bones and the question is can these dry bones live and God quotes the people as saying our bones are dried up our hope is lost we are cut off.

That's them saying in exile we're lost there is no hope for us we're dead there is no future and yet the great vision of Ezekiel 37 as you remember is that the prophet prophesies and the spirit of God comes into these dry bones and they stand up a very great host and that was a kind of parable a story a vision of what God was going to do in taking the people from death in Babylon to life in Jerusalem.

A great Sri Lankan theologian D.C. Niles once wrote these words which I found very powerful indeed hope lies amidst the ruins of our expectations hope lies amidst the ruins of our expectations well it is by the word of the Lord and by the power of God that God achieves his purpose and that is extraordinary because if you look back at the last chapter of 2 Chronicles the book just before Ezra just look back at 2 Chronicles 36 verse 15 this is reading the reasons why the people were taken off to exile in Babylon the Lord the God of their ancestors sent them persistently to them by his messengers because he had compassion on his people his dwelling place but they kept knocking the messengers of God despising his words scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord against his peoples became so great that there was no remedy therefore he brought up against them the king of the

[10 : 13] Chaldeans the Babylonians who killed their youths with a sword in the house of the sanctuary had no compassion on a young man or young woman the aged or the feeble he gave them all into their hand all the vessels of the house of God large and small the treasures of the house of the Lord the treasures of the king all these he brought to Babylon they burnt the house of God broke down the wall of Jerusalem burnt its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels so the people have gone off into exile because they would not hear God they would not obey God and yet the word of God which condemned them is the word of God which gave them hope in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished the Lord set up the spirit of king Cyrus of Persia the bizarre thing about the Christian world today is that some Christians know God's word and don't know God's power and other

Christians know God's power but don't know God's word but notice that in Ezra chapter 1 and verse 1 both the word of God and the power of God come together so when you read Ezra chapter 1 what you're meant to do is to trust God's word and to trust God's power God's word tells you what he's going to do and God's power does it God's word explains how God's power will be used what we might expect of God's power what God has promised to do and God's power achieves what God has promised it's very simple really put it this way God does what he says God says what he does or if you like to put it this way the power of God achieves the word of God or another way again the word of God works the word of God works so the great good news of

Ezra chapter 1 and verse 1 is that God has spoken and God has stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia now the big question you might be wondering is does this mean King Cyrus of Persia becomes a believer well he may have become a believer but King Cyrus had a general policy of repatriating all the conquered people he also had a general policy of serving every God that was available it's a bit like backing every horse in the race that was King Cyrus policy and so the idea of sending the Jews back to Jerusalem was so that their God would pray for him so if he sent all the captive peoples from all over the Babylonian empire back to their own countries where their gods lived and those people prayed for King Cyrus then he should be safe in fact we've got a record of his words outside the Bible and this is what he says let all gods which I have brought to these cities pray daily to Bel and Nebo for length of days for me so what a splendid policy you back every god there is and you ask those gods to pray to your gods to keep you safe it worked quite well until the day he died and then it stopped working quite well but if you ever do take over an empire may I recommend that policy of King

Cyrus don't keep all the cross people near you send them off to the edge of the empire and get them to pray for you it might work so when God's people are in a mess God's word and God's power bring God's people to the next stage of God's gospel plan so I think what God wants us to do out of Ezra chapter 1 is to trust his words and to trust that he has enough power to achieve what he has promised why did God bring them back well one answer is there in Ezra 1:1 in all that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished you might remember if you know the prophecy of Jeremiah that there were in Jeremiah's day a hundred prophets who were false and one who was true and all the false prophets had the wrong message and only

Jeremiah had the true message and God tells Jeremiah that one way you know a true prophet is that what he says happens so God put these words in Jeremiah's mouth Jeremiah spoke them and then God is backing his prophet he's doing what he promised to do by the mouth of Jeremiah God's word will certainly be fulfilled because it's backed up not just by good intentions great plans great ideas it's backed up by all the power of God and if we meet the word of God in Isaiah chapter 1 we also meet the power of God changing the mind of King Cyrus and also stirring up the heads and families of Judah and Benjamin in verse 5 everyone whose spirit God had stirred they got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem you read that and you think well of course they want to go home again well they've been away for a long time you know it's a miracle actually to get them out of

[16:02] Babylon they were quite happy there they had little Babylonian places to live and Babylonian dogs to play with and Babylonian games to play they were very happy in Babylon as a matter of fact and to go 700 miles across a desert and start rebuilding a ruined city is not my idea of a great Sunday school outing as a matter of fact it was a great miracle that God changed Cyrus' mind and a great miracle that God changed the mind of the people because when you read through Ezra Nehemiah you discover what a difficult time they had what great opposition there was to their return what difficulties there were in the journey and the great pressure of those who lost heart lost confidence in God on the way through but when God's people are in a mess God's word and God's power can be trusted to bring God's people to the next stage of God's gospel plan see what the bible wants us to do or rather what God wants us to do through the bible is to face both grim reality and certain hope interesting isn't it how some people live by avoiding grim reality they live in cloud cuckoo land just not facing reality some people face so much reality that there's no hope at all you see it in art don't you you go into the galleries I went recently to see the exhibition and some painters back in the 17th century life looks lovely doesn't it this lovely pastoral scene and you think I'd love to live in that world it looks so happy then you go to the next

I hope there's some artists here taking it across with me you go to the next gallery and then you've got a great black blob and this is a 20th century 21st century view of reality all dark all black you see the earlier painters not facing the grim reality of life as it was they only painted happy pastoral scenes and the painters of the 20th and 21st century facing grim reality with no hope well what a great book the bible is because the bible faces us with grim reality and great hope that's splendid isn't it because it means whatever we meet we can be confident in God's power and God's word I visit lots of churches and churches in Australia and overseas as well in England and India and Pakistan and it seems to me that some congregations won't face their problems and some congregations face their problems so seriously they've got no hope at all but what a great message

Ezra chapter one is for both lots of congregations isn't it because chapter one says you can face the reality of what's going wrong but have hope and Ezra chapter one says if you face the reality please have hope because of God's word and God's power I talked earlier about God being against his people and he was against his people but only for a time because in his kindness and mercy he forgave them their sin and brought them back from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem the God who had been against them for a time was for them for eternity so despite the failure of the people of God the church of the Old Testament despite the triumph of the world the Babylonians despite the judgment of God God still had a great plan for his people and you and

I as a matter of fact are beneficiaries of this plan because if the people of God are not come back from Babylon to Jerusalem the Lord Jesus Christ would not have been born in the Holy Land in the city of David Bethlehem he couldn't have gone to the temple he couldn't have gone to Jerusalem so part of our gospel hope part of our gospel story lies here in Ezra where we find the first step towards returning the people of God from exile in Babylon to the Holy Land and the Holy City and in that land in that city the Lord Jesus Christ David's greatest son will be born and die and rise again the message of Ezra chapter 1 is not just a message for them at that particular time not just a message for us today though it is a message for us today it's also the big message of the Bible isn't it because we know that one day the Lord

Jesus Christ will return as he's promised and then God's word and God's power focused in Jesus Christ will bring all of God's people from all the nations of the world to the next stage of God's gospel plan life eternal in Jesus Christ friends face reality and have hope face reality and have hope oh gracious God our loving heavenly father we thank you that you teach us again and again on the pages of the Bible to trust your word and you teach us again and again on the pages of the Bible to trust your power we thank you that you've shown us New Testament believers to trust your word and your power in your son Jesus Christ and we thank you that all your promises find their yes in him and that all that you promised to achieve you achieved through him through his death and resurrection through his ascension to heaven and you will achieve through his return so please help us to live in the real world facing difficulties and stresses and strains and sins and judgment but also being people of substantial hope as we trust in you and in your son Jesus in his name we pray

[22 : 25] Amen