

The Providence of God

Thank God He gives us difficult things to do!" said Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*.¹

The first time I read that statement, I shook my head in disagreement; but I was young and inexperienced then, and it seemed smarter to do the easy things that made me look successful. However, I've lived long enough to understand the wisdom of Chambers' statement I've learned that when God tells us to do difficult things, it's because He wants us to grow. Unlike modern-day press agents and spin doctors, God doesn't manufacture synthetic heroes; He grows the real thing. "The hero was a big man," wrote Daniel Boorstin; "the celebrity is a big name."²

In God's Hall of Heroes are the names of nearly 50,000 Jews who in 538 B.C. left captivity in Babylon for responsibility in Jerusalem. God had called them back home to do a difficult job: to rebuild the temple and the city and restore the Jewish community in their own land. This noble venture involved a four months' journey plus a great deal of faith, courage, and sacrifice; and even after they arrived in the Holy City, life didn't get any easier. But as you read the inspired record, you can see the providential leading of the

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Lord from start to finish; and "if God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

You see God's providence at work in three key events.

1. The release of the captives (Ezra 1:1-4)

More than a century before, the Prophet Isaiah had warned the Jews that the people of Judah would be taken captive by Babylon and punished for their sins (Isa. 6:11-12; 11:11-12; 39:5-7), and his prophecy was fulfilled. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar deported the royal family and took the temple vessels to Babylon. In 597, he sent into exile 7,000 "men of might" and a thousand craftsmen (2 Kings 24:10-16); and in 586, he destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and exiled the rest of the Jews in Babylon, except for "the poor of the land" (2 Kings 25:1-21).

In 538, Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, conqueror of Babylon, issued a decree that permitted the exiled Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple. This too had been prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 44:28). What Cyrus did twenty-five centuries ago reminds us today of some important spiritual truths.

God is faithful to His Word. For at least forty years, the Prophet Jeremiah had warned the leaders of Judah that the Babylonian exile was inevitable (see Jer. 20:4-6; 21:7-10); and he pled with them to repent of their sins and surrender to Babylon. Only then could they save the city and the temple from ruin. The leaders didn't listen—in fact, they called Jeremiah a traitor—and the Holy City and the temple were destroyed in 587-586.

But Jeremiah also announced that the Captivity would be for seventy years (Jer. 25:1-14; 29:10; see Dan. 9:1-2). Bible students don't agree on the dating of this period, whether it begins with the Babylonian invasion in 606 or the destruction of the city and temple in 587-586. From

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606 to 537-536, when the remnant returned to Judah, is seventy years; but so also is the period from the fall of Jerusalem (586) to the completion of the second temple in 516. Regardless of which calculation you accept, the prediction and its fulfillment are astonishing.³ Whether He promises chastening or blessing, God is always faithful to His Word. "Not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you" (Josh. 23:14, NKJV). "There has not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56, NKJV). "Heaven and earth shall pass away," said Jesus, "but My words shall not pass away" (Matt 24:35).

God is faithful to His covenant. In spite of their sins, these exiles were God's chosen people and children of the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:1-3). The nation had broken the covenant, but the Lord had remained faithful to His Word. He had called the Jewish nation to bring blessing to all the earth, and He would see to it that they fulfilled their mission. Through them, the world would receive the knowledge of the one true and living God, the written Word of God, and ultimately the Savior of the world. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

God is in control of the nations. It was the Lord who raised up Nebuchadnezzar—"My servant" (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10)—to chasten the people of Judah; and then He raised up Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians and establish the Persian Empire. "Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to His service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him" (Isa. 41:2, NIV; see also v. 25). The Lord called Cyrus "My shepherd" (44:28) and "His anointed" (45:1), and Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would liberate the exiles and enable them to rebuild their city and temple (v. 13).

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God's people need to remember that the Lord God is sovereign over all nations and can do what He pleases with the most powerful rulers. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn this lesson the hard way (Dan. 4:28-32), but then he confessed: "His [God's] dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand" (Dan. 4:34-35).

God can do as He pleases with the rulers of the earth; and He has demonstrated this in His dealings with Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17), Ahasuerus (The Book of Esther), Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:28), Augustus Caesar (Luke 2:1), and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:20-24). King Jehoshaphat said it perfectly: "O Lord, God of our fathers, are You not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in Your hand, and no one can withstand You" (2 Chron. 20:6).

People don't have to be Christian believers for God to use them. Whether a mayor, governor, senator, prime minister, ambassador, or president, God can exercise His sovereign power to accomplish His purposes for His people. This is one reason Paul exhorts believers to pray for those in authority, not that our political agenda might be fulfilled, but that God's will might be accomplished on this earth (1 Tim. 2:1-8). "God can make a straight stroke with a crooked stick," said Puritan preacher John Watson; and that's what he did with Cyrus!

The king's decree boldly acknowledged the Lord and called Him "the Lord God of heaven" (Ezra 1:2), a title that's used seventeen times in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel. The decree addressed two kinds of people: (1) those who wanted to return to their land and (2) those who preferred to remain

in Babylon. The latter group was urged to give offerings to help finance the expenses of the journey and the restoration of the temple.⁴

The Jews also accepted gifts from their Gentile neighbors (v. 6, NIV). When the Jews left Egypt, they plundered the Egyptians (Ex. 12:35-36) and collected the wages the men should have received during their years of slavery. Now the Jews were making their "exodus" from captivity, so they collected wealth from their pagan neighbors and dedicated it to the Lord⁵

2. The return of the remnant (Ezra 1:5-2:70)

God not only stirred the spirit of Cyrus to grant freedom to the captives (1:1), but He also stirred the hearts of the Jews to give them the desire to return to Judah (v. 5). "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The same God who ordains the end (the rebuilding of the temple) also ordains the means to the end, in this case, a people willing to go to Judah and work.

The treasure (Ezra 1:5-11). Not only did the travelers carry their own personal belongings, but they carried 5,400 gold and silver temple vessels which had been taken from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:8-17; Jer. 52:17-23; Dan. 1:2; 5:1-3). These items were carefully inventoried by the treasurer and delivered to Sheshbazzar, the appointed ruler of Judah.

Who was Sheshbazzar? He's mentioned four times in Ezra (1:8,11; 5:14,16) but not once in any of the other post-exilic books. He's called "the prince of Judah" (1:8, KJV, NIV), a title that can mean "leader" or "captain" and often referred to the heads of the tribes of Israel (Num. 1:16, 44; 7:2; Josh. 9:15-21). The word "Judah" in Ezra 1:8 refers to the district of Judah in the Persian Empire, not to the tribe of Judah; so Sheshbazzar was the appointed leader of "the children of the

province [of Judah]" (Ezra 2:1).

Many Bible students believe that Sheshbazzar was another name for Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, who with Joshua the high priest directed the work of the remnant as they rebuilt the city and the temple. He's mentioned twenty times in the postexilic books, and according to 2 Chronicles 3:16-19 was a grandson of King Jehoiakim and therefore a descendant of David.

Ezra 5:16 states that Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the temple, while Ezra 3:8-13 attributes this to Zerubbabel, and Zechariah 4:9 confirms it. It seems logical to conclude that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person. It wasn't unusual in that day for people to have more than one given name, especially if you were a Jew born in a foreign land.

When you add the numbers given in Ezra 1:9-10, they total 2,499; but the total given in verse 11 is 5,400. A contradiction? Not necessarily, for it was important that Zerubbabel and the leaders keep a careful inventory of the temple treasure, and it's not likely they would make that big a blunder. The statement in 1:10, "and other vessels a thousand" suggests that verses 9-10 list the larger and more valuable items, while many smaller objects weren't even listed in categories.

The leaders (2:1-2). From the parallel list in Nehemiah 7, we must add the name of Nahamani (Ezra 2:7), bringing the total to twelve men, one for each of the tribes. The Nehemiah in verse 2 is not the man who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, because he didn't come on the scene until 444. And the Mordecai listed isn't the Mordecai of the Book of Esther. "Jeshua" is Joshua the high priest, who is mentioned twenty-three times in the postexilic writings. He was an important part of the leadership of the remnant and served at the side of Zerubbabel the governor.

Geographically, the Southern Kingdom (Judah) included

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only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; but over the years, people from the other ten tribes had moved to Judah, so that all twelve tribes were represented in the Captivity. The Bible says nothing about "ten lost tribes"; it appears that all twelve are accounted for (James 1:1; Acts 26:7).

Everything in God's work rises and falls with leadership. When God wants to accomplish something, He calls dedicated men and women to challenge His people and lead the way. A decay in the quality of a nation's leaders is an indication that trouble is ahead. The British essayist Walter Savage Landor wrote, "When small men cast long shadows, it's a sign that the sun is setting."

The families and clans (Ezra 1:3-35). The long lists of names given in Scripture, including the genealogies, may not be interesting to the average reader, but they're very important to the history of God's people. Unless there's an inheritance involved, most people today are more concerned about the behavior of their descendants than the bloodline of their ancestors; but that wasn't true of the Old Testament Jews. It was necessary for them to be able to prove their ancestry for many reasons.

To begin with, unless you could prove your ancestry, you couldn't enter into the rights and privileges of the Jewish nation, of which there were many. The Israelites were a covenant people with an important God-given task to fulfill on earth, and they couldn't allow outsiders to corrupt them. Furthermore, the Jews returning to Judah couldn't reclaim their family property unless they could prove their lineage. Of course, it was especially important that the priests and Levites certify their ancestry; otherwise they couldn't serve in the temple or share in the benefits of that service, such as the tithes and offerings and the assigned portions of the sacrifices.

In verses 3-20, the names of eighteen Jewish families are

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listed, totaling 15,604 males. When they took a census, the Jews usually included men twenty years of age and older (Num. 1:1-4); but we aren't certain what procedure was followed here. In Ezra 1:21-35, the volunteers were listed according to twenty-one cities and villages, a total of 8,540 men. We don't know the names of all these 24,144 men, but they were important to the Lord and to the future of the nation and its ministry to the world.

The priests and Levites were especially important to the nation (vv. 36-42), for without them, there would be no reason to rebuild the temple. Four groups of priests totaled 4,289 men, and they would be assisted by 341 Levites, some of whom were singers and gatekeepers. The Levites also assisted the priests in teaching the people the law of the Lord (Deut 33:8-10; Neh. 8:5-8).

The 392 "Nethinim" (Ezra 1:43-54) and "children of Solomon's servants" (vv. 55-58) were workers in the temple who were not priests or Levites. In Hebrew, "Nethinim" means "those given" and seems to refer to prisoners of war who were given to the priests to perform menial tasks in the temple. (See Josh. 9:23, 27 and Num. 31:30, 47.) "Solomon's servants" were probably a similar group of men, established during Solomon's reign. Eighty years later, Ezra would have to send for more Levites and Nethinim to help with the temple ministry (Ezra 8:15-20).

The disqualified (Ezra 1:59-63). There were 652 people who couldn't prove their Jewish ancestry. (The towns mentioned were in Babylon, not Judah.) Zerubbabel and Joshua didn't send these people back home but allowed them the rights of "strangers and foreigners" (Ex. 22:21,24; 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut 10:18; 14:29).

We aren't told how many priests were unable to provide adequate credentials, but we are told that they were excluded from serving in the temple. No doubt some men thought

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they could enter the priesthood and have a much easier time living in Jerusalem, but Zerubbabel rejected them. God had made it clear that any outsider who attempted to serve at the altar would be put to death (Num. 1:51; 3:10). These men were treated as "strangers" and allowed to make the journey, but Zerubbabel the governor⁶ excluded them from the priestly privileges until they could be tested by "the Urim and Thummim."⁷ This was the means provided for the high priest to determine God's will (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21).

The totals (Ezra 1:64-67). The total that Ezra gives (42,360) is 12,542 more than the total you get when you add up the individual figures given in the chapter. Nehemiah also gives 42,360 (Neh. 7:66). However, in giving this list, Ezra didn't say that these several groups represented all the men who left Babylon, nor do we know how many more joined after the list was completed. It's possible that he counted men only from Judah and Benjamin, so that pilgrims from the other ten tribes make up the difference.

We do know that an additional 7,337 servants, both men and women, went along, which speaks well of their Jewish masters and mistresses, for these servants (slaves?) might have been sold in Babylon and remained there. Apparently, they preferred to be with the Jews. This many servants (one-sixth of the total) also suggests that some of the Jews had become wealthy in Babylon.

The 200 singers (Ezra 1:65) were not a part of the temple ministry but were "secular singers" who performed for Jewish festive occasions such as weddings (see 2 Chron. 35:25). From the time of the Exodus (Ex. 15), the Jews composed songs to honor God and celebrate the blessings of life. Over a dozen different musical instruments are named in Scripture. The captivity in Babylon hadn't been a time for singing (Ps. 137:1-4); but now that the Jews were "heading home," they had a song to sing.

3. *The rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 2:68-3:13)*

Ezra wrote nothing about the long trip (900 miles) or what the Jews experienced during those four difficult months. It reminds us of Moses' description of Abraham and Sarah's journey to Canaan: "and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gen. 12:5). "It is a strange narrative of a journey," said Alexander Maclaren, "which omits the journey altogether... and notes but its beginning and its end. Are these not the main points in every life, its direction and its attainment?"

Investing in the work (Ezra 2:68-70). This was undoubtedly a thank offering to the Lord for giving them a safe journey. The people gave their offerings willingly and according to their ability, which is the way God's people are supposed to give today (2 Cor. 8:8-15; 9:6-15). According to Nehemiah 7:70-72, both the tribal leaders and Zerubbabel the governor gave generously, and the common people followed their good example.

Setting up the altar (Ezra 3:1-3). The seventh month would be Tishri, our September-October, a month very sacred to the Jews (Lev. 23:23-44). It opened with the Feast of Trumpets; the Day of Atonement was on the tenth day; and from the fifteenth to the twenty-first days, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. But the first thing Joshua the high priest did was restore the altar so he could offer sacrifices for the people. The people were afraid of the strong nations around them who resented the return of the Jews, and they wanted to be sure they were pleasing to the Lord. Again, we see a parallel with Abraham, who built an altar when he first came into the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7). This is an Old Testament picture of Matthew 6:33.

Joshua also restored the various sacrifices commanded by the Law, which would include a burnt offering each morning and evening and extra offerings for special days. It

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wasn't necessary to wait until the temple was completed before offering sacrifices to God. As long as there was a sanctified altar and a qualified priest, sacrifices could be given to the Lord. After all, it's not the external furnishings but what's in the heart that concerns God the most (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16-17; Hosea 6:6; Mark 12:28-34).

Laying the foundation (Ezra 3:7-13). The work didn't begin until the second month of the next year, which means they spent nearly seven months gathering materials and preparing to build. It was in the second month that Solomon started building the original temple (1 Kings 6:1), and he gathered his materials in much the same way (Ezra 3:7; 1 Kings 5:6-12). Joshua and Zerubbabel were in charge of the project, assisted by the Levites. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" asked David (Ps. 11:3); and there's only one answer: lay the foundations again! That's what spiritual revival is all about, getting back to the foundations of the Christian life and making sure they're solid: repentance, confession, prayer, the Word of God, obedience, and faith.

Note the emphasis on unity. The people gathered together (Ezra 3:1); the workers stood together (v. 9); the Levites sang together (v. 11); and all the while, the people were working together to get the foundation laid. Their tasks were varied, but they all had one goal before them: to glorify the Lord by rebuilding His temple. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:2).

Following the example of David, when he brought up the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16), and Solomon, when he dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 7:1-3), the priests and Levites sang praise to the Lord, accompanied by trumpets and cymbals; and the people responded with a great shout that

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was heard afar off. (See Pss. 47:1; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4; 135:3; 136; and 145:1-11.) The people united their hearts and voices in praise to the Lord for His goodness to them.

But at this point, their "togetherness" was interrupted as the young men shouted for joy and the old men wept "with a loud voice." Why were they weeping on such a joyful occasion? Because they had seen the original temple before it was destroyed over fifty years before, and the new edifice was nothing in comparison. (Haggai would later preach a sermon about this. See Hag. 2:1-9.) These godly old men longed for "the good old days," but it was the sins of their generation that had caused the fall of the kingdom to begin with! Had their generation listened to the Prophet Jeremiah and obeyed God's Word, Jerusalem and the temple would still be standing.

It's unfortunate when the unity of God's people is shattered because generations look in opposite directions. The older men were looking back with longing while the younger men were looking around with joy. Both of them should have been looking up and praising the Lord for what He had accomplished. We certainly can't ignore the past, but the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. God's people are a family, not a family album filled with old pictures; they're a garden, not a graveyard covered with monuments to past successes.

We have similar generational disagreements in the church today, especially when it comes to styles of worship. Older saints enjoy singing the traditional hymns with their doctrinal substance, but younger members of the church want worship that has a more contemporary approach. But it isn't a question of accepting the one and rejecting the other, unless you want to divide families and split the church. It's a matter of balance: the old must learn from the young and the young from the old, in a spirit of love and submission (1 Peter

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5:1-11). When they were new, many of our traditional hymns were rejected for the same reasons some people reject contemporary praise choruses today. "But each class [the young and the old] should try to understand the other's feelings," said Alexander Maclaren. "The seniors think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of thought"⁹

Every local church is but one generation short of extinction. If the older believers don't challenge and equip the younger Christians and set a godly example before them (Titus 2:1-8; 1 Tim. 5:1-2), the future of the congregation is in jeopardy. The church is a family; and as a family grows and matures, some things have to fall away and other things take their place. This happens in our homes and it must happen in the house of God. To some people, "change" is a synonym for "compromise," but where there's love, "change" becomes a synonym for "cooperation with one another and concern for one another."

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1)