

HOPE RENEWED

Do you remember toward the end of 1989 we saw the collapse of one communist government after another in Eastern Europe? Just six months earlier, there were not many folks around that would have had a lot of hope that the Berlin Wall would be knocked down and that such a revolutionary change would take place. The majority of people in those countries welcomed the changes that were taking place. They had not let the communistic system cause them to just give up their desire for freedom. They had kept their hope alive for more than 40 years. As things started to move in parts of Europe, people in other areas had a rejuvenation of their hope and in many areas sweeping changes were accomplished.

Nearly 2500 years ago, a large group of Jews had been taken away from their country and forced to live in the area that we know as Iraq today. Their nation had been destroyed, the Temple in Jerusalem looted and then torn down. It was a senseless destruction--similar to what the Iraqis did to Kuwait just recently. These Jews lived in Babylon for 70 years and yet many of them kept alive the hope that they would return to Judah one day. This hope was based on prophetic writings of Jeremiah.

EZRA 1:1-4 Earthly kingdoms come and go, but the word of the Lord stands forever. The Middle East is the cradle of civilization and it has seen and continues to see nations at war with other nations. There have been a series of dominant forces in the area. Some rising in power only to fall after a period of time to a new force coming on the scene. Egypt had its time of glory and then never did have really significant influence. Then there was Assyria, Syria, Babylon, and now Persia. As we read these historical accounts in the books of the Old Testament we see that the rise and fall of these empires were orchestrated

by the God of Heaven. When the time was right for the people of Judah to return to their homeland, God raised up a leader that conquered Babylon who made it his business to return captive people to their homelands. That leader was Cyrus the king of Persia. The writer of Ezra saw these events unfolding so that the prophecy of Jeremiah would be fulfilled.

As Cyrus prepared to let the Jews return he associated himself with the God of the Jews. He was a very wise man. He did not tell them that his god was greater than their God and that was the reason he was in power. He told them that their God had chosen him to be king of that area of the world. Apparently, this is also what Cyrus told those who worshipped other gods. He claimed that their god had chosen him. In this way, Cyrus gained some degree of cooperation from these captive people that he was returning to their homelands. There may have been some economic reason for Cyrus to let these people go. As they went, he was still recognized as the earthly ruler of all these territories and these would yield more tribute if people were there carrying on commerce and raising crops rather than all of them being concentrated in Babylon.

Cyrus did not force people to return, but made it possible for them to do so. He wanted them to reestablish their religion and their places of worship for he knew that this provided a stability to the society. He was willing to give money from the treasury to help the cause. He also encouraged those Jews that were not returning to contribute to the cause. We are seeing a destabilization of our society because certain people are inhibiting the practice of religion in an open manner in our society. There is much ridicule and put downs so that it is becoming less and less popular to be taken seriously in one's religion. Because of

this the stabilizing effects of religious influence is becoming less and less in our society.

EZRA 1:5-6 Apparently, the leadership structure of the Jewish society had not broken down. The extended family unit was the basic building block of the society. When the time came to do something, the head of these family units (or clans) came to the forefront along with the religious leaders (the priests and Levites) to call the people to the task that was at hand. The neighbors of those that were returning gave them money and provisions for the job and the journey. The offering is described as a "free-will offering." People were not obligated to contribute but did so because they wanted to. A free-will offering is something that goes beyond the tithe that we are to give to God so that the work of the Kingdom can be carried out. Those that chose not to return or those that were unable to return to Judah had a chance to participate in what was happening by giving support. We have opportunities to participate in various ministries in all parts of the world by our giving to support missions.

EZRA 1:7-8,11 One of the practices of conquering nations was to confiscate the idols of the gods of the people that were conquered and to put them in the temples of their gods. This would send a message that the god of the victorious nations was greater than the god of the conquered nation. When Nebuchadnezzar captured and destroyed Jerusalem, he did not find any idol of the God of the Jews. What he did find was many vessels of silver and gold that were used in the temple, so he took those and put them in the house of his gods. As the people were preparing to leave to rebuild the temple, Cyrus made sure that these precious vessels were returned. The vessels were special in that they were consecrated to the service of the worship of God.

Even today as we come into a place of worship, someone who is not informed might

wonder where the object of worship is located. They would look around and all they would see would be people. The temple of the Old Testament had consecrated vessels of silver and gold and the worship place of the New Testament also has consecrated vessels, not of silver and gold, but of flesh and blood. We are the vessels that are used in the worship service of God. As Paul said in his letter to the church at Corinth, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power might be of God and not of man."