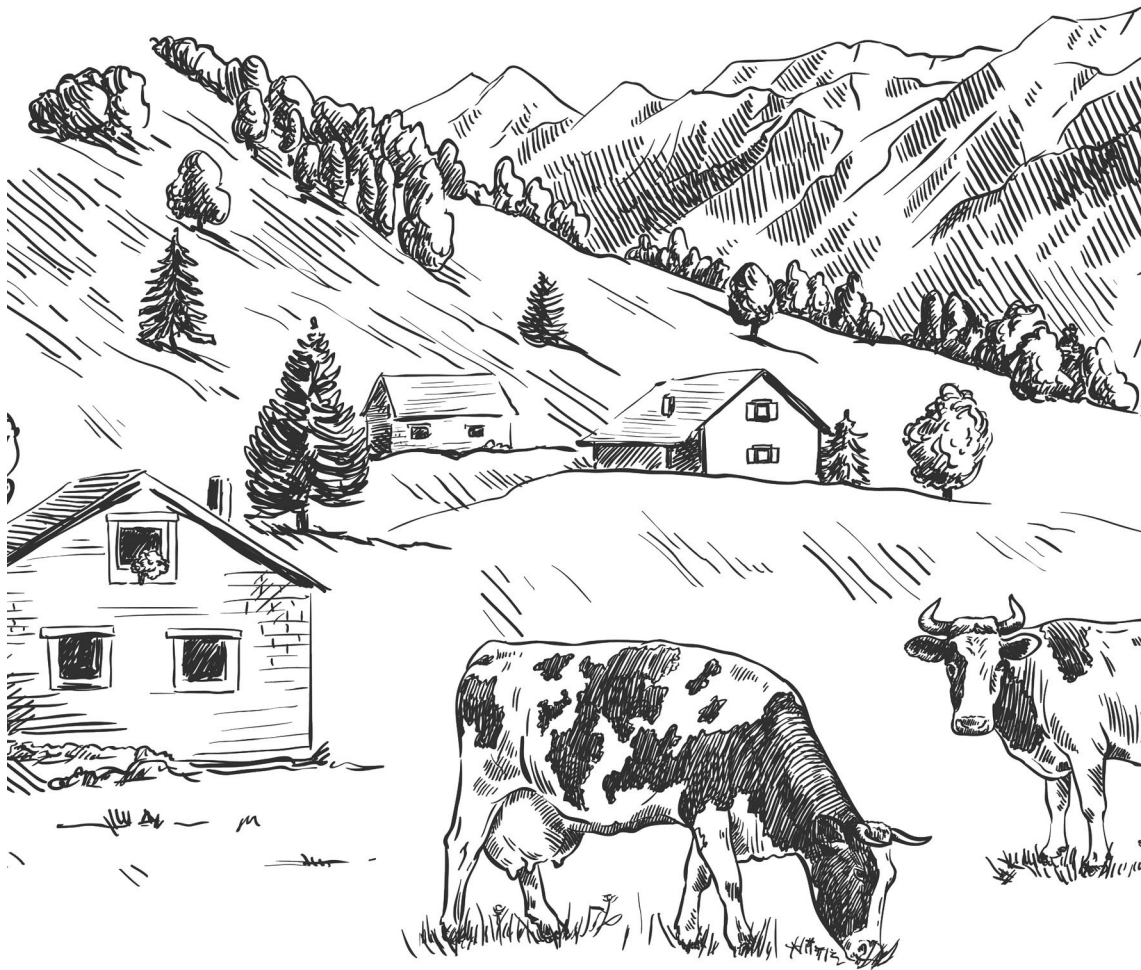


The king's heart is in the hand of the  
Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth  
it whithersoever he will.

Proverbs 21:1



# CHAPTER ONE



## Raised Up for a Purpose

**READ: EZRA CHAPTER 1 & ISAIAH 44:28-45:5**

In Proverbs 21:1, we're told,

*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will. (KJV)*

This truth could not be more evident than it was in the days of exile. We saw King Nebuchadnezzar used by the Lord to bring His children into captivity, and once again we see a pagan king being used by God to free them.

The Bible refers to Cyrus as God's anointed shepherd in the book of Isaiah. You see, this movement wasn't something that Cyrus decided to do out of the kindness of his heart, but rather it was God working in him and through him to begin this good work.

*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13, KJV)*

### ISAIAH'S PROPHECY

What's interesting to note is that this return from captivity was prophesied several years before by the prophet Isaiah. Even more fascinating yet is the fact that Isaiah's prophecy was so specific that he pointed to Cyrus by name more than 150 years before he was born:

*Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut... For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me. (Isaiah 45:1&4, KJV)*

The Lord called Cyrus by name. Not because he was a king, nor because he was anyone special. He was simply called by God for a mission in the same way that you and I may be called. Not because of anything we have done, but because God has chosen to use us.

God could have easily chosen a Jew, but He chose to use Cyrus so that the prophecy might be fulfilled.

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

According to the laws of Persians and Medes, a written decree could not be reversed, even if the king himself had a change of mind. We see this in Esther 1:19 where it says, "Let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed," and again in Daniel 6:8 where it says, "Issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."

*I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 45:13, KJV)*

### GOD RAISED CYRUS UP

When I see the words, "I have raised him up..." I'm reminded that a calling from God doesn't happen in a split second. It might feel that way sometime, but the fact is that our mission is a life-long process of preparation. Every trial we go through and every person we meet is yet another step directed by God.

I'm reminded of the many times my plans have failed. The days that my plans fell through. What I didn't see then is that I wouldn't be where I am now if I was steering the ship. In fact, I would have sunk it a long time ago with my off-the-cuff plans and impulsive decisions.

I'm also reminded of the many times that things have worked in my favor. The days when things just fell into place. Those things that I feared, which turned out to be nothing. Opportunities that knocked on my door, and other doors that were opened...

How many of those have I chalked up to good fortune, to luck, or to chance? Perhaps I didn't use those words exactly, but I can tell you—that's what I thought. At least some of the time.

The thing is, things don't just fall into place. If they did, I wouldn't have to clean my kitchen every day or make my bed. It would fall into place, wouldn't it?

When my boys walk into a clean kitchen, it's because I went before them and cleaned up the mess. When my kids were young and we'd all sit

*He Directs Our Steps*

down for dinner, it was because I went before them to prepare a meal.

## HE DIRECTS OUR STEPS

If we can understand that, maybe we can start to see God's work behind the scenes. Maybe we can start to give Him thanks where thanks are due. And, maybe, we'd understand that He's directing our steps.

*The Bible tells us, "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps." (Proverbs 16:9, KJV)*

God was using Cyrus just as He used Nebuchadnezzar 70 years before. Remember what God said about Pharaoh,

*For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. (Romans 9:17, KJV)*

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

"The Cyrus Cylinder," an ancient clay cylinder inscribed with a declaration in the name of Cyrus referring to restoration of temples and repatriation of exiled peoples, has been taken by many scholars as corroboration of the authenticity of the biblical decrees attributed to Cyrus.  
(Wikipedia)

All of the good and all of the bad is just another step closer to where God is taking you. Does that mean that God orchestrates sin? Absolutely not. But remember what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."

Look at yourself today and ask yourself if you would be at this place without the good and the bad. If you would prosper under the hand of God without first being tried by the fire.

I'm reminded of Esther, who like King Cyrus was raised up for a purpose. Every detail including her family history, her beauty, and her poise was designed to lead her to a place where God would use her as an instrument of His power in saving her people.

*For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14, KJV)*

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

The public declaration made by King Cyrus that granted the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem was made in 538 BC. And, although we see some of the Jews returning, a vast majority of the Jews chose to stay behind in Babylon.

Ezra 1:1 refers to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. What was that prophecy?  
(See Jeremiah 29:10)

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What mission did God appoint to  
Cyrus?

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How did the neighbors (the Jews who  
stayed behind) assist the Israelites in  
their return?

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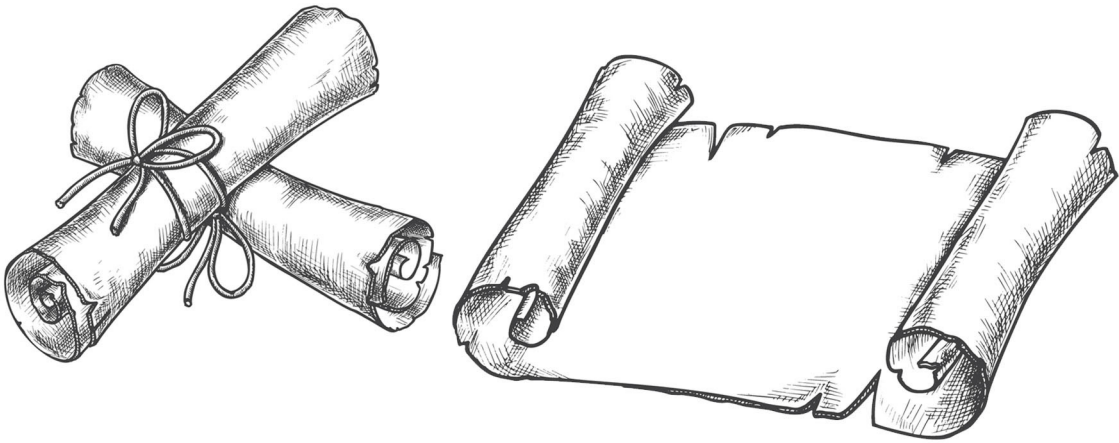
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How many articles of gold and silver did Sheshbazzar,  
The Prince of Judah, bring back to Jerusalem?

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Look up Sheshbazzar (Hebrew name Zerubbabel) using an online resource like  
Wikipedia. List three things you find out about him:

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# CHAPTER TWO



## A Chosen Priesthood

**READ: EZRA CHAPTER 2 AND NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 7**

Opening the Bible to Ezra Chapter 2, your first thought might be, should I skip over this chapter and just head to the next? After all, what can be learned from a list of names? Is it really important to know this?

The answer is found in 2 Timothy 3:16, where we read,

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (KJV)*

So it is with this chapter--it's inspired, and profitable to the one who digs deep.

### URIM AND THUMMIN

First off, we see that the families are listed, and then we come to a portion of scripture that talks about the lineage of the priesthood. After being in exile for 70 years, the family records of this particular group were nowhere to be found. If you've read the book of Numbers, you might remember that the Levites were the only tribe chosen for this ministry. Without proof of their ancestry, they wouldn't qualify to serve, and in fact could be put to death if it was found out they were wrong.

*And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel. And thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall wait on their priest's office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death. (Numbers 3:9-10, KJV)*

And so, this group of Levites were excluded from the priesthood until the High Priest was present, and able to rule on the matter with the Urim and Thummin.

If you read Nehemiah, the book that directly follows Ezra in the Bible, you'll notice that many events in the book of Nehemiah directly correspond with those in the book of Ezra as they occurred simultaneously. In fact, if you look at Nehemiah Chapter 7, you'll see that it's nearly identical to Ezra Chapter 2. After it lists the families that returned with Zerubbabel, the Tirshatha (governor) tells the Levites not to eat of the holy things until the priest comes to rule on the issue with the Urim and Thummin.

If you look back to Exodus 28:30, you'll see that the Urim and Thummin were placed in the priest's breastplate. Perhaps they were sticks or stones. No one is quite sure what they were, but we do know that they were used to make decisions and to determine the will of God.

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

The Joshua mentioned in Ezra chapter 2 is not the same Joshua who led the Israelites into The Promised Land. The Joshua we read about in this chapter is the high priest, son of Jozadak. We find out more about him in Zechariah 6:9-14.

## ALL JUDGEMENT IS GIVEN TO CHRIST

Although the meaning is not clear, they are generally translated as "lights and perfections." They foreshadowed the Messiah, the light of the world, and the revelation of God. In times past, God spoke to His people through the prophets and judgements were made through the priests. Once Jesus came, He spoke to us through His Son to Whom all judgement is given. If you want to know the will of the Father you need only to look to His Son.

*For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him. (John 5:22-23, KJV)*

As I'm reading this chapter, I can't help but be reminded of that great day, when the scroll is opened and my name is found written in the book of life. Many will stand before God's throne on that day saying, I'm part of this family and so I am saved, or I attended this church for so many years and so I'm a Christian... but the fact is that we're not saved by affiliation, we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

And so, in much the same way that the Levites waited for the High Priest to come with the Urim and Thummin, we see John weeping in Revelation Chapter 5, because no one was worthy to open the scroll. He writes,

*And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. (Revelation 5:5, KJV)*

A Royal Priesthood

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

The temple servants we read about in Ezra 2:43 were also known as the Nethinims. We first meet them in Joshua Chapter 9. As part of a peace treaty they made with the Israelites the Gibeonites were ordered to serve in the temple, and were thereafter known as the Nethinims or temple servants.

What we're seeing here in this chapter of Ezra is a glimpse of salvation by grace through faith. The scroll upon which each one of our names has been written. Not because of our lineage, not because of any church affiliation, not because of anything that we have done. We're saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

### THE SACRED FOOD

In verse 63, the governor instructs them not to eat any of the sacred food. This was particularly important as there were strict rules in the Levitical Law in regards to the sacred food: it was forbidden for anyone outside of the priest's family (or slaves born in their home) to eat.

The breaking of bread, and the partaking of the sacrifice was an invitation to fellowship with God in an intimate way. And just as they were chosen for that role in the priesthood, we have been chosen by God,

*But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 2:9, KJV)*

When Jesus gave up His life on the cross He bridged that gap between God and man. He is the "bread of life," offering each one of us an invitation to fellowship with God. When we partake of communion, we show honor to God as we remember the price that was paid for the fellowship we freely have to commune with our Father in Heaven.

## ≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

In 1 Samuel 21, we read how David approached a priest in Nob asking for food. Since the priest didn't have any ordinary food on hand, he gave David the consecrated bread as well as Goliath's sword. Consequently, Saul was enraged, and as a result of his rage 85 priests were killed as well as the men, the women, and the children of Nob.

What does 1 Peter 2:9 say?  
Write the verse out here.

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What warning does Jesus give us in  
regard to communion in 1 Cor.11?

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As royal priests, what are some ways that we can offer sacrifices to the Lord?  
Or, what are some things we might surrender to the Lord?

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What should we do before we come to the communion table?  
See Matthew 5:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:27.

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How many people returned from exile  
(including the slaves and the singers)  
in this chapter?

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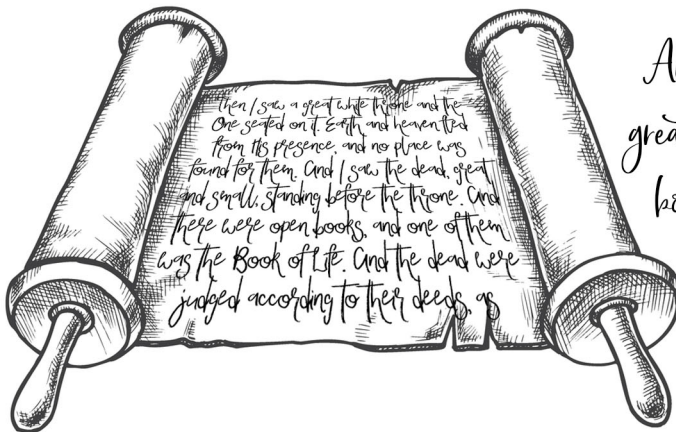
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How many of them were Levites?

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*And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life.*

