

## FREE AT LAST

EZRA 1:1-5 | In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: <sup>2</sup> “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. <sup>3</sup> Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem... <sup>5</sup> Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

**G**od promised to do a new thing. And here it is. A new Exodus. An old thing done in a new way.

Instead of plaguing a hard-hearted Pharaoh, he softens the heart of a Persian king to let his people go. In 538 BC, King Cyrus urged every Jew across his empire to return to Judah and rebuild the house of God.

Free at last! The exile is over. The new norm is here. But how many of God’s people will actually return? Surprisingly, only a remnant of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and some Levites among them, responded to the summons (EZRA 1:5). All Jews were free to go. Why did the other ten tribes stay behind?

On the one hand, ancient business documents confirm that many Jews enjoyed tremendous success and prosperity in Persia. The first banking establishment in history was founded by Jewish exiles. Why would thriving entrepreneurs such as these uproot and migrate to a backwater province like Judah which was also under Persian rule?

On the other hand, by the time of Cyrus, the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been exiled for nearly two centuries. That’s four

or five generations. Too long for a people without boundaries. They began blending in with Persian culture. In contrast, Judah and Benjamin had only been in exile for about 70 years, as Jeremiah had predicted. These exiles, therefore, were more likely to remember their roots, keep the faith, and pass it on to the next generation.

The Northern Tribes that remained in exile are wistfully remembered today as the ‘ten lost tribes’. Over time, many of their descendants assimilated into Persian society and lost their Jewish identity, forfeited their inheritance, and derailed their destiny.

Alas for Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Ephraim, and Manasseh! *A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more* (MATT 2:18; JER 31:15).

## WALL OF DUTY

■ This pandemic is an invasion. A crisis of uncertainty which came at a shocking speed and a stunning scale. And we are not anywhere near its end. Still, we must dare envision V-Day! Never lose hope. Never give up. No matter how you feel, fix your eyes on our Sovereign Lord who alone can turn the tide. Put your total confidence in him. Confess the truth: God’s plans for Singapore are for welfare and not for evil, to give us a future and a hope (JER 29:11). Pray with passion, purpose, and perspective from his Word: *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance* (ECC 3:1, 4).

■ This pandemic is an exile. Remote virtual is the modus operandi across the board. *Ekklesia* as we know it has been severely disrupted. Every congregation had to isolate and shift its services and ministries online as a short-term measure. For the long-term, however, the online church is unhealthy and unbiblical as the default. Left to our own devices, there will be consequences. We should be very concerned. We are created for community. We are designed for human connections. Pause for a

moment. Be still. Be silent. Let God stir your spirit. Pray.

■ Wake up. Pre-Covid, the Singapore Church was already showing symptoms of casual, consumeristic Christianity. Covid-19 merely exposed and exacerbated these pre-existing conditions. Soul search. Consider the confessions below. To what extent do they reflect the state of your spirituality and the state of your church? Be honest. Repent.

- We love the comfort of church service at home—in pajamas!
- We love the convenience of church online. We can enter and exit as and when we please.
- We multi-task while the service is going on. Make coffee. Take breakfast. Chat online. Browse social media. Do chores. Fix lunch. Order dinner.
- We tune out when we feel bored or when we don’t like what we hear.
- We love our new-found freedom. With easy access to such a great variety of church services online, we google other options.

■ Sober up. Habits are formed anywhere between eighteen days and eight months. *We are what we repeatedly do* (ARISTOTLE). In this pandemic, we have grown too comfortable with habits that make us a people without boundaries and without accountability. We are losing the sense of identity and belonging as a community. It makes you wonder. Post-Covid, when the exile is over, when all restrictions are finally lifted, how many able-bodied souls will renounce the twin gods of comfort and convenience, and return to the ancient path of in-person *koinonia* in the house of the Lord? Will Rachel weep for her children again? Pray for straying sheep. Wail for lost tribes. Repent from waywardness. Raise a hue and cry: O Lord, stir our spirits! Awaken us from slumber! Shake us out of our stupor! Bring us to our senses! Deliver us from evil!