FREE TO WORSHIP

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezra 6:1-12
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 5; 6:1-12; 10:1-5
TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Ezra 6:1-12

I. The Conduct of a Search

Ezra 6:1-2

1 King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. 2 A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:

Memorandum:

1. Archaeological remains of Persian *archives* reveal detailed reports of taxes, expenditures, and local government occurrences throughout the empire. However, not all official records were stored *at Babylon*. Other cities held local and national records and treasures.

2. The search for Cyrus's decree took investigators to *Ecbatana*, a city located about 285 miles northeast of Babylon. The city served as the summer palace for Persian royalty, so it is possible that Cyrus issued his decree there during the summer of 538 BC (see Ezra 1:1).

II. The Content of the Decree

Ezra 6:3-12

3 In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem:

Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide, 4 with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. 5 Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.

6 Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there. 7 Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

8 Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. 9 Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, 10 so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

[11] Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. [12] May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem.

I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

3a. The focus of Cyrus's decree expands on a directive given in a previous text (see Ezra 1:2-4). *King Cyrus* had given permission for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland. Now the text elaborates on a key detail of their return: the reconstruction of *the temple of God in Jerusalem.*

3b. Prior to Darius's decree, the altar, the *place to present sacrifices*, had been reconstructed (Ezra 3:2-3). Now *the temple* would *be rebuilt* to provide a space for worship. The temple's height and width were to be *sixty cubits*, or approximately 90 feet each way.

4a. Archaeological discoveries in modern-day Syria have shown that the use of *timbers* after several rows of *large stones* helped buildings survive earthquakes. This practice was utilized in the construction of the inner courtyard of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:36) and the courtyard of Solomon's palace (7:12).

4b. Those remaining in exile contributed to the temple's reconstruction (Ezra 1:4, 6). But in an act of goodwill, the decree placed part of the financial burden on *the royal treasury*. These funds came to the treasury via new taxation practices.

5. The centrality of the sacred *articles*, their removal from *the house of God*, and their eventual return to the temple is again made evident by Cyrus's repetition (compare Ezra 1:7-11). These articles were made by Solomon and were used at *the temple* for worship (see 1 Kings 7:48-51). However, *Nebuchadnezzar* confiscated them and took them to *Babylon* following the destruction of Judah and *Jerusalem*.

These articles had been used in unholy ways during the exile (see Daniel 5:1-4). Therefore, they would need to be reconsecrated before they were *returned* and *deposited* into the temple. The restorative act required sacred anointing oil.

6. What follows are the direct words of Darius to his officials, *Tattenai* and *Shethar-Bozenai*. The *Trans-Euphrates* refers to the area west of the Euphrates River and east of the Mediterranean Sea. This area was a satrapy, or province, of the Persian Empire, of which Tattenai was *governor* (see Ezra 5:3).

7. Zerubbabel served as *the governor of the Jews* who had returned from exile (see Ezra 5:2). The governor coordinated local affairs with the Persian authorities. Another group of localized leadership consisted of *the Jewish elders*.

This division allowed the leaders to respond to the internal challenges of the community and maintain good relationships with the Persians. Additionally, it allowed the Persians to maintain control over the satrapy without concern in all matters.

8. Darius's *decree* concerned the financial burden of rebuilding the *house of God*. The Persians provided space for its reconstruction. They also provided a financial backing, following Cyrus's precedent (Ezra 6:4, above).

Specifically, Darius committed to funding part of the temple's construction *expenses* from taxes and *revenues* from the *Trans-Euphrates* satrapy. This action reflects a larger policy to restore and provide for local temples and cults in the empire. Darius's financial generosity highlighted his desire to honor the temple, whether or not he believed in the temple's God.

9. In addition to financial backing, Darius ordered officials to provide the necessary resources for regular sacrifices in the temple. *Young bulls*, *rams*, and *male lambs* were valuable livestock for the burnt offerings required of Israel (see Leviticus 1:2-13; 22:27; Numbers 7:87-88; 1 Chronicles 29:21). With these animals the returning exiles would eventually offer sacrifices (Ezra 8:35).

Flour made of *wheat* was used alongside daily sacrifices and burnt offerings (see Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 2:1-2; 5:11; 6:20; etc.). *Salt* accompanied grain offerings (2:13) and burnt offerings (Ezekiel 43:24). The preservative properties of salt served as a reminder of the preserving nature of God's covenant. *Oil* accompanied the sacrifices, and *wine* was presented as a drink offering (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13).

10. Darius's motives for backing the reconstruction became evident. He desired that the returning exiles have a location where they might *offer sacrifices* rightly. Darius hoped that the *God* of the Jews would be content and would hear their prayers, specifically those for *the king and his sons*.

Leaders asking that their constituents *pray* to their gods was not inconceivable. Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC) described how Persians would offer a prayer for the king while offering sacrifices to their pagan gods. The practice continued through the New Testament era. Sometimes rulers recognized Israel's God as a supreme God (Daniel 2:47; 6:26-27). As a result, Israel fulfilled the promise that they would be a blessing to Gentiles (Genesis 12:3).

11. As with an ancient covenant or a royal inscription, the *decree* ended with a warning or curse for anyone who might disregard and defy the *edict* of the king. The dramatic and violent conclusion would not have shocked ancient audiences. Worshippers and leaders would have thought it appropriate that anyone not honoring the temple of a god should have *their* own *house* destroyed and turned to *rubble* (compare Jeremiah 26:1-6).

The underlying Aramaic text is unclear whether the punishment referred to being hanged, crucified, or *impaled*. The Law of Moses restricted the practice of impaling (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Persian audiences would be familiar with the punishment of impalement, as Persian officials suffered a similar gruesome fate after a failed assassination attempt of the king (Esther 2:21-23).

12. The decree's final line acknowledges the presence of *God* and the protection of all under his domain. This is the same God who promised to choose a place where he would cause *his Name to dwell* (Deuteronomy 12:11). This promise referred to the unique place where God met his people, the *temple in Jerusalem*.

Darius anticipated that Israel's God would protect his holy place and all within its premises. By calling a curse to *overthrow any king or people*, Darius followed an ancient Near Eastern tradition that taught that the gods would protect that which was considered precious.

While unlikely that Darius was influenced by ancient Hebrew literature, the psalmist warned against the "kings of the earth . . . and the rulers" who "band together against the Lord and against his anointed" (Psalm 2:2). The Lord would "break them" and "dash them to pieces" (2:9). Those who would go against the Lord and his intentions would be destroyed. Those who would stand against and defile the temple of God would suffer destruction.

While the temple of God that Darius envisioned no longer stands, God's promises to watch over his "temple" remain true (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Involvement Learning

Free to Worship

Into the Lesson

Consider a creative project like growing an orchard, installing a shower, or staining an outdoor deck. Make a list of some challenges you might face in the process and solutions to those challenges.

It's easy to become overwhelmed when all we see are problems and obstacles in front of us. But we serve a creative God who is all-powerful and provides for his people.

Into the Word

Read 2 Kings 24:8–25:21 and describe the damage done by Nebuchadnezzar.

Read Ezra 6:1-7. In what ways did God use the decree of Ezra 6 to redeem what was lost or destroyed in 2 Kings 24–25?

Read Ezra 6:8-10. What items listed represent the abundant generosity required by the decree?

Who in the Scripture text received the abundance of gifts from God?

Into Life

Write one task that you believe God is asking you to do.

What challenges prevent you from obeying that task?

Thought to Remember

God can work through surprising circumstances to bring restoration and renewal.