

EZRA

“LEADING *the* RETURN to GOD”



CROWN
CHRISTIAN
PUBLICATIONS

Royal Reading

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**SUNDAY SCHOOL AND
BIBLE TEACHING SERIES**

EZRA

Leading the Return to God

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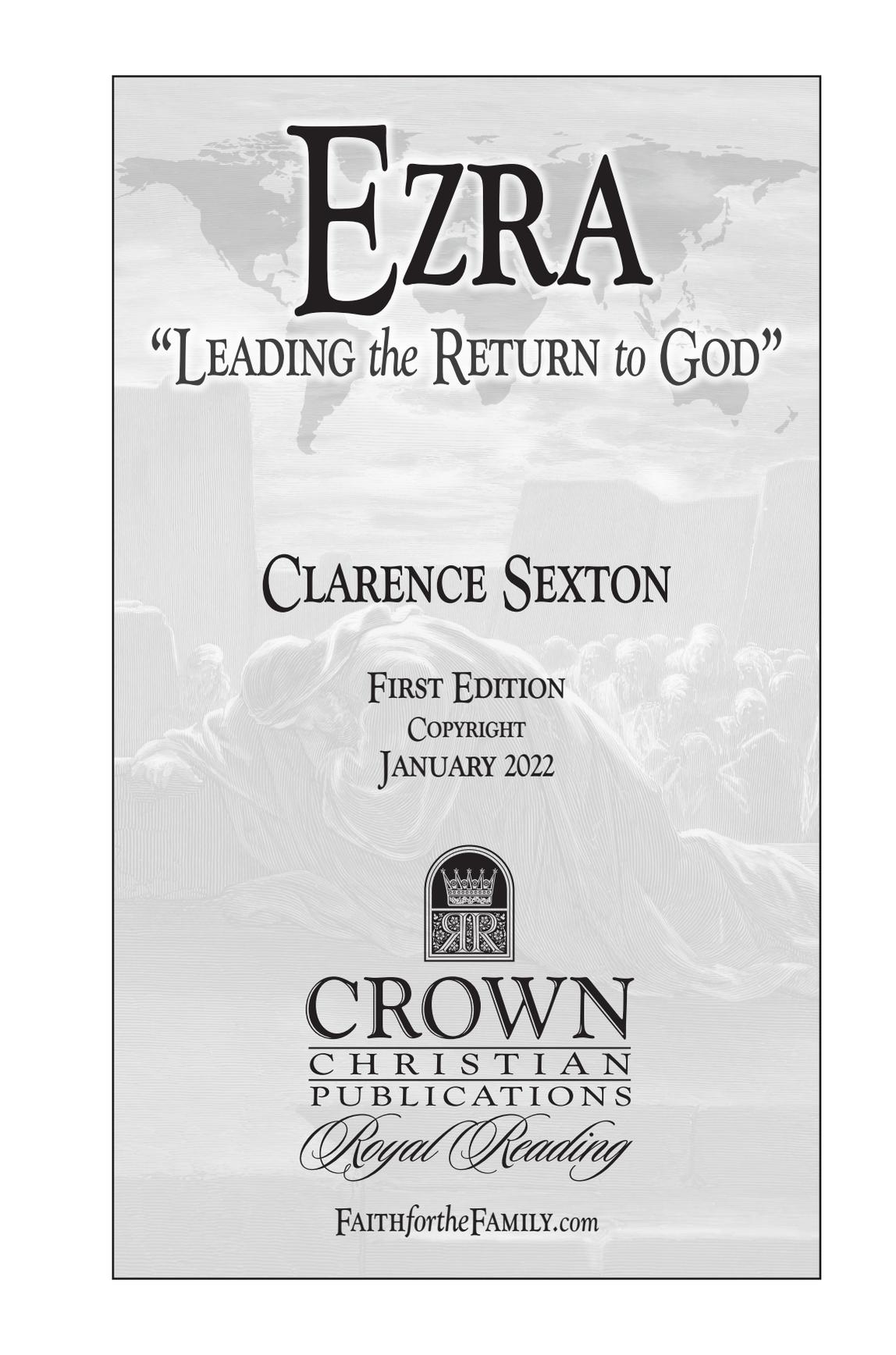
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EZRA

“LEADING *the* RETURN to GOD”

CLARENCE SEXTON

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Foreword

We must stop making “Babylon” a better place to live and return to the God of the Bible.

As you read this book, it is my prayer that you will say, “Amen,” again and again as the God of heaven speaks to your heart about His mighty power to work in our day.

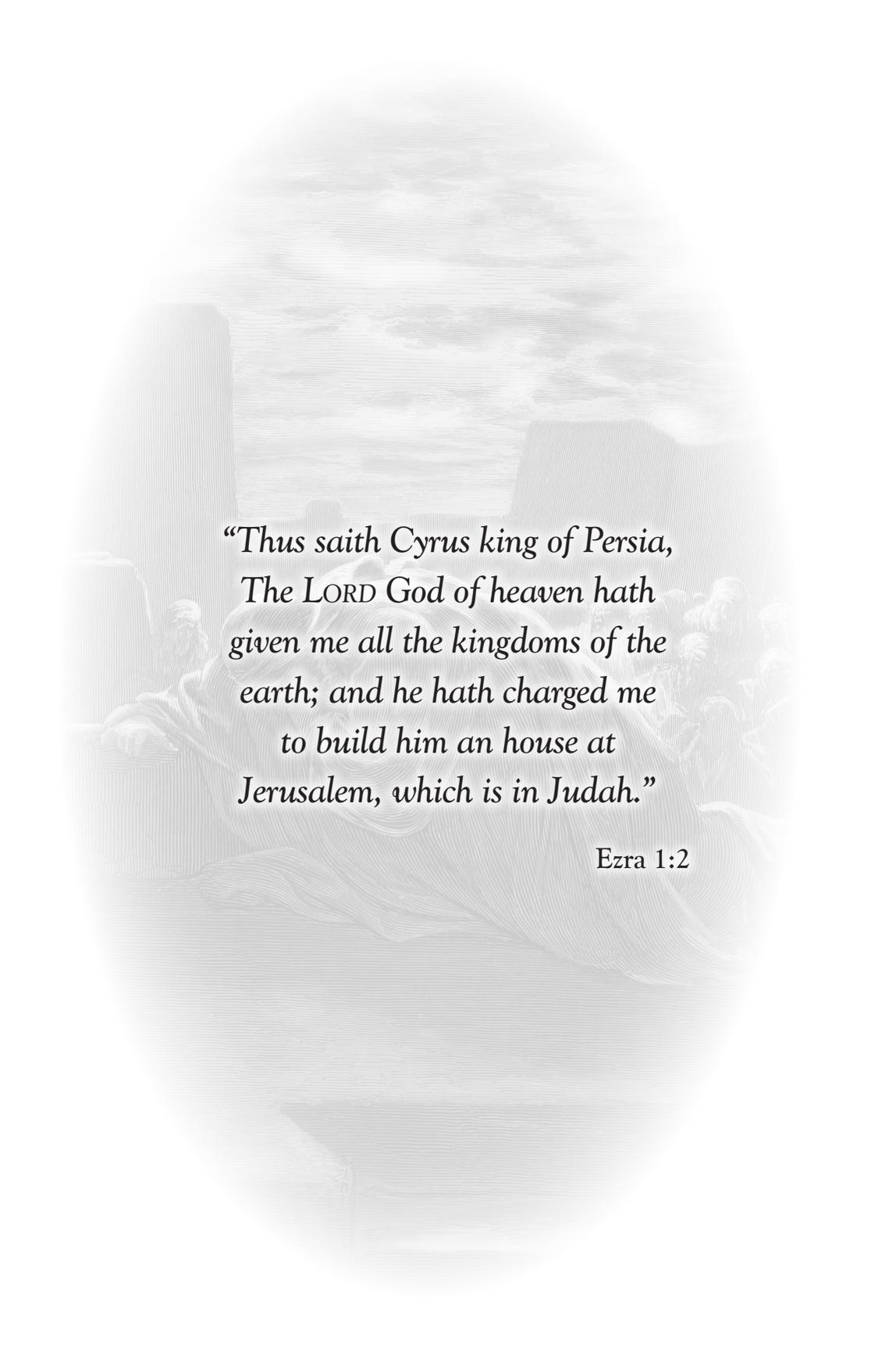
Put to death all your good ideas and begin again your obedience to God.

Praying for the Coming Revival!

Clarence Axtell
Acts 5:42

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*“Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia,
The LORD God of heaven hath
given me all the kingdoms of the
earth; and he hath charged me
to build him an house at
Jerusalem, which is in Judah.”*

Ezra 1:2

INTRODUCTION

GOD KEEPS HIS WORD



he book of Ezra records one of the greatest turning points in the work of God for all time. I have several books about the history of military conquests. One of them describes fifteen decisive battles that changed the course of history. As I was looking through that book recently, I thought to myself, “Did God know the outcome?” Of course! God’s Word declares that the Lord sees the outcome of every war before the battles are ever fought.

God is never caught off guard. Our minds cannot fully grasp how the affairs of men move in harmony with the will of God through the ages, but the Bible says, “*He is before all things*” (Colossians 1:17). Understanding this will enlarge our thoughts about the greatness of God.

As we study the book of Ezra, we must allow God to pull back the curtain and show us His mighty hand moving and working in human affairs. In the end, we trust we will see the Lord working

Ezra

in our own lives. “*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28).

The Word of God says in Ezra 1:1-3,

Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

Note this one word in the first verse: “*fulfilled.*” As we begin studying this book, let us start by studying fulfilled prophecy. The Bible is a book of prophecy. You may argue that *all* the Bible is not prophecy. Some parts of Scripture are historical accounts to give us the true record of what happened. This subject brings us to a greater understanding of God.

Centuries before Cyrus the king of Persia had defeated the Babylonians and given the decree that the Jews could return home, God foretold it by the mouth of His prophets. When we speak of prophets, we are talking about men who foretell things along with men who forth tell (boldly proclaim).

God gave certain men the ability and the words to write before time to foretell events that would take place. The Word of God

God Keeps His Word

recorded not only that the event would happen, but the name of the person who would make the decree and proclamation.

In Isaiah 44:28-45:3, the Bible says,

That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.

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; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.

This is a prophecy of the Lord given to the Gentile king of the Medo-Persian Empire, the conquerors of the great Babylonians.

Daniel also foretold the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The image the king saw in his dream revealed the empires that would rule the world. First, the Babylonian empire; second, the Medo-Persian Empire; third, the Greek Empire; fourth, the Romans; and then the division of the Roman Empire into West and East with its capitals in Rome and Constantinople. Finally, God's Word described the image's ten toes revealing the division of the ten kingdoms that would be raised up in our day.

*The Christian life is a series
of new beginnings.*

*While the Devil is closing doors,
God is opening them. God says,
“Here is a way for a new
beginning. It is the way of mercy.”*

God Keeps His Word

In studying the Babylonian Empire, Persian Empire, Greek Empire, and Roman Empire, which was divided into west and east, much emphasis has been given to the western part of the Roman Empire and what happened in Rome. Recently, many Bible teachers have turned their attention to what is happening in Constantinople, the eastern side of the split of the Roman Empire. Constantinople is now Istanbul, Turkey. The caliphate is combining to move in this particular age of human history.

God foretold all of this, just as He foretold that the king of the Medo-Persian Empire would conquer the Babylonians, giving details about how that victory would come to pass centuries before it happened. The Lord

also revealed that King Cyrus would give a decree that God's people could go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of God.



In Isaiah's prophecy, the Lord foretold that Cyrus was to be His shepherd and His anointed. The Lord chose a Gentile, not a Jew, and assigned to him this task.

The Word of God says in Proverbs 21:1, "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.*" When we consider the kings and kingdoms of our day, remember that the Bible promises us: "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.*"

The Lord is working in our world, and He gives us examples of this in the Bible. God works through dreams, visions, and messengers. God works on the hearts of kings because the heart of a king is in the hand of God. God is on the throne of the universe, and the reins of the world are still in His hands!

We have a perfect example of this with the king of the Persians who captured the kingdom of the Babylonians and said to God's people they could be set free. The Bible says in Jeremiah 25:12, *“And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”*

The twenty-ninth chapter of Jeremiah records a prophecy given before the fall of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. During Jeremiah's ministry, the people of Jerusalem were living in horrible fear of the Babylonians. Eventually, the Babylonians besieged the city of Jerusalem, starved the people, broke through the walls, burned the temple, and carried away the Jews as their captives back to Babylon for seventy years. But before this happened, God promised them the Babylonian captivity would not be the end of His care over their lives.

For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:10-13

Even before they were ever captives, God said, “You will be seventy years captive in Babylon, and then I am going to deliver you. I will raise up the Empire of the Medes and Persians to

God Keeps His Word

anoint a king by the name of Cyrus. I will lead Cyrus to read the Word of God and discover the responsibility I have assigned him to set you free and send you back to Jerusalem.”

And I will cause the captivity of Judah and the captivity of Israel to return, and will build them, as at the first. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me.

Jeremiah 33:7-8

The book of Ezra reveals this turning point. God spoke to King Cyrus and said, “I want you to let the people know they can go back to Jerusalem and to Judah.” What we read in Ezra 1:1-3 shows us that the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah were fulfilled.

Many of the prophecies that we find in the Bible have already been fulfilled, as is the one we are reading about here. But we can also find some prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled. For example, the Lord Jesus Christ said that He would come again. He gave us this prophecy over three hundred times in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and just as surely as He came once, He is coming again!

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament use the expression, “*The Lord said,*” or, “*Thus saith the Lord,*” 2,600 times. Think of that! If you are reading through the books of the Old Testament, you will read 2,600 times that what you are reading is the Word of God.

The Word of God came to Cyrus, saying, “It is time,” and so the Jews had the opportunity to go back. “*Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth*” (Ezra 1:2). This Gentile king recognized that God had put this power and authority in his hand. Do you recognize what power and authority God has put in your hand?

Ezra

Do you recognize who is really in charge? Cyrus said, “The God of heaven has given me this responsibility.”

Then he asked this question: “*Who is there among you of all his people?*”

He was speaking about one type of people. In the kingdom of Babylon that he had conquered, and in the kingdom he had rallied together of the Medes and Persians, there were many types of people, but he said, “Among us, in this part of the world, there is a special people.”

We refer to these special people as the Jews. Keep your eyes on the Jews. The Jews are God’s clock, and God’s eye is upon them. Let us read a promise that He made to them back in Genesis.

In the twelfth chapter of Genesis, God called a man by the name of Abraham, and through Abraham, He raised up a people we now refer to as the Jews.

In Genesis 12:1-3, the Bible says,

Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

All families of the earth would be blessed! King Cyrus read the Word of God. Because of the victory God gave him over the Babylonians, when he thought about the God of heaven and earth, he thought about the blessings that had come to him because of these people the Jews, and then he made this decree on their behalf.

*God wants to bring every
one of us to the place where we
remove all secondary causes and
see Him at work in our lives.*

Ezra

God says He will bless them that bless the Jews, and He will curse those who curse the Jews. We are grateful to God to live in a nation that has had its eye on Israel and has recognized them as God's chosen people. They are the people to whom and through whom the God of heaven and earth desires to make Himself known.

The Lord wants His creation, the people of all the earth, to know Him. He chose a man by the name of Abraham, from that man raised up a family, and from that family a nation, and to that nation, God shows His special favor. To them God reveals Himself, and through them He reveals Himself to the rest of the world.

When the Lord Jesus Christ came into this world, He came unto His own, and His own, the Jews, rejected Him. They received Him not (John 1:11). When God made Himself known in the Person of His Son, He was the perfect revelation of God the Father. The express image of the invisible God was made known in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:3). But what did they do with Him? They rejected and crucified Him. He is not finished with them, but because they rejected Him they have been set aside for a time.

One of the most heartbreaking things you will read in the Bible is found in Matthew 27. The rejected Saviour was on His way to the cross to be crucified. He had been officially rejected by Israel and the leaders of Israel as the Promised Messiah. They attributed His works to the work of the Devil.

The Bible says in Matthew 27:21-25,

The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas. Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is

God Keeps His Word

called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified.

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.

The name of Christ means the *Anointed One*, the Promised Messiah. I cannot explain the suffering of the Jewish people. Machines of torture were made just for them. I am not going to try to know all the answers. Only God knows all the answers. But the Saviour was rejected and they said, "Let His blood be on us and on our children."

Yet, God loves them so. The Bible says in Romans 1:16, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*"

If we were to travel back in history, we would find this moment in time when God judged His people, Israel. The Northern Kingdom had already fallen to the Assyrian Empire, which was absorbed by the Babylonian Empire.

Jerusalem was once the pearl of the whole world, but the Babylonians, the first rulers of the world, came upon the Southern kingdom of Judah, brought down the capital city Jerusalem, the Temple, and all the things associated with the worship of the Jews.

The Word of God described this destruction in Lamentations. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "*The kings of the earth, and all*

the inhabitants of the world, would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy should have entered into the gates of Jerusalem” (Lamentations 4:12). The city was left in smoldering ruins, burned to the ground, and the temple was destroyed.



*We are living at
a pivotal point in
human history.*

Judah had tried to make a contract with Egypt. This infuriated King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians. In response, he came without mercy upon the people. During the siege before the fall of the city, things became so pitiful that mothers were consuming their own babies up to a certain length to try to stay alive. All that ended when the Babylonians broke through the wall.

King Nebuchadnezzar overtook the king of Judah when he attempted to flee into the plains of Jericho. They mercilessly killed his children in front of him and then burned out his eyes so that the last thing he ever saw on earth was the death of his own children. Then they put him in a cage and carried him through the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem back to Babylon.

In response, God said, “I am going to judge you, Babylon. I am going to bring you down and make you the kind of desolation that you have made out of Jerusalem.” The Lord had allowed Babylon to be an instrument to chastise His own people, the Jews. For seventy years the captive Jews lived in Babylon.

Then after the Babylonians were defeated by the Medes and Persians, one Jew of royal lineage, born in Babylon, read the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, went to the king, and said to King Cyrus, the man reigning over the new Medo-Persian Empire, “God put you in His Word and said that you were brought to power so that you could release His people and send them back to Jerusalem.”

God Keeps His Word

The first remnant returned with Zerubbabel. His name implies that he was born in Babylon. Many years later, the Word of God says Ezra came. Ezra's responsibility was to restore biblical worship among the people of God. God blessed Ezra in this work. There was much peril involved, but it was his assignment.

We can identify with Ezra and his God-given assignment. The Lord has allowed this moment in history for a remnant of His redeemed people who truly know Him and His Word to lead a new beginning of biblical worship. He has given us a window of time to obey.

The Lord says through His prophet in Ezra 9:8, *“And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God.”* They would not have this opportunity for long. As urgent as this message was in Ezra's day, it also stirs us to make the most of the opportunity God has given in our time.

God is working in this world. In the book of Ezra, the Lord fulfills His promised prophecy. The Word of God says in Isaiah 46:9, *“Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me.”*

We may be living in a garden of strange gods, and we may have fewer people worshipping the true and living God in America than ever before, but God says, “Take a look at your history.” Modern-day Americans may know everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours, but they know very little about what has happened in the last two hundred years.

Take the long look as you read this passage again and ask the Lord to enable you to apply it to your heart.

*Remember the former things of old: for I am God,
and there is none else; I am God, and there is none
like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and*

Ezra

from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.

Isaiah 46:9-11

The Lord has given us His prophetic plan and purpose. Christ Jesus is coming again. He is calling His people to Himself. This is the day to strengthen the things that remain and establish the truth of God's Word.

The way things are now is not the way they will always be. We are living at a pivotal point in human history. All around us events are unfolding that remind us that there is a true God on the throne and He desires our worship. He is to be recognized, honored, and glorified. We need to understand what the Bible teaches about fulfilled prophecy. Just as the Lord fulfilled His prophecy in Ezra's day, He will do it in our day.

God Keeps His Word

Your New Beginning of Obedience

- Memorize and meditate on the truths these verses reveal about God.

Next to each verse, write what is taught about the character of God.

Colossians 1:17 –

Romans 8:28 –

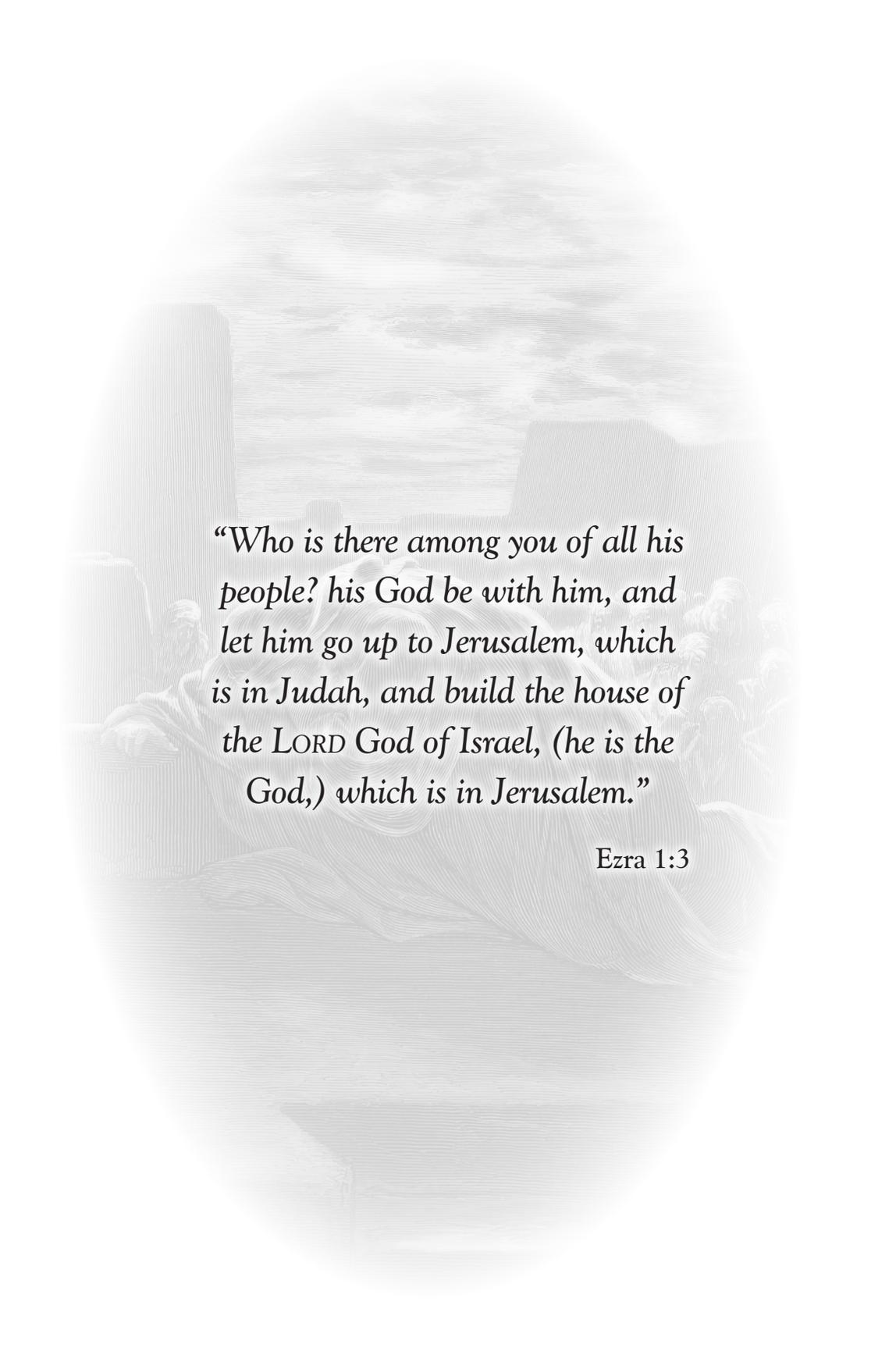
Proverbs 21:1 –

Hebrews 1:3 –

Romans 1:16 –

Isaiah 46:9-11 –

- Give thanks to God that He has all power over this earth and its rulers.
- Use the opportunities God has given you to speak to people about who God is and what Christ has done for you and them!



“Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.”

Ezra 1:3

CHAPTER ONE

WILL YOU RETURN?



he only way to change the future is to disturb the present. The Lord is not dependent on religious coalitions. He can choose to use one man, one woman, or one young girl like He did in the Welsh Revival. Anything less than the moving of God and real revival is too little.

Revival begins with a remnant. God is always working. In this book of the Bible, we witness God's mercy along with the results of powerful preaching which give witness to the true elements of revival. God's work is never dead. It may appear cold and lifeless, but these are only great indicators of our need for revival.

When God moves and works, He moves in the hearts of individuals. Who among us is desiring above all else to see God glorified? Who among us is ready to return to God? God wants to bring each one of us to the point in our lives where He is enough.

The book of Ezra is about restoring biblical faith to Israel. You may imagine that they already had biblical faith, but they did not. They had been in captivity for seventy years because of their disobedience to God. They had desecrated the sabbath



*We cannot pass
our experience
on to the next
generation, but
we must give
them the truth.*

of the Lord, and God had put them in Babylonian captivity for all the times they had not remembered God's Sabbath.

Before we discover the details in the scriptural account recorded by Ezra, let us consider its historical landscape. Long before Ezra's time, the Jews had rebelled against God. God judged their rebellion by sending them into captivity. His prophets had warned the people that this judgment was coming, but they had also promised them that God would protect those among the rebellious who stayed true to Him. This remnant would be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild.

Seventy years passed from the time of the first stage of captivity (when Daniel was carried away to Babylon) to the time of the first return. Under Zerubbabel, the remnant returned and began rebuilding Jerusalem by setting up the altar and reconstructing the temple. After fifteen years of delay in rebuilding the temple, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were used by God to stir the Jews again to action. Their preaching moved the people to finish rebuilding the temple. This was a new beginning of biblical faith and true worship.

Nearly sixty years after the temple was rebuilt, God called Ezra to lead another remnant to return to Jerusalem. This group was reinforced twelve or thirteen years later by the return of Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah combined to constitute a

Will You Return?

THE THREE STAGES of JUDAH'S CAPTIVITY		
B.C. 606-586		
JEHOIAKIM 1st Stage 606-605 Daniel taken	JEHOIACHIN 2nd Stage 598 Ezekiel taken	ZEDEKIAH 3rd Stage 586 End of Monarchy
The 'SEVENTY YEARS'		
B.C. 606-597 9 Years	B.C. 597-586 11 Years	B.C. 586-536 50 Years
Jeremiah xxv. 8-14; xxvii. 6-17; xxviii. 14; xxix. 10		

THE RETURN FROM BABYLON		
<i>First Stage</i>	<i>Second Stage</i>	<i>Third Stage</i>
Under ZERUBBABEL	Under EZRA	Under NEHEMIAH
B.C. 536	B.C. 458	B.C. 445

There is no easy way to follow Jesus Christ, and there is no cheap, bargain basement sale on doing God's work. He does not come to build our church, and we do not build His church. He said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Will You Return?

movement that marked the turning point in Jewish history. Through each stage of captivity and return, God protected His people and provided a way for them to keep worshipping Him. What God did in Jerusalem in Ezra's day prepared the way for the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Word of God says in Ezra 1:1-3,

Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

God used King Cyrus to call His people back to Himself. He desired to reveal Himself to the Jews so that through a remnant of His people, He could reveal Himself to the rest of the world. From those who returned and restored biblical worship, the lineage of Christ would continue until in God's appointed time the Son of God would be born of a virgin. But first, God's people had to go back and restore biblical worship in Jerusalem.

Our God has given us the same assignment. He tells us in Malachi 3:6, "For I am the LORD, I change not." The way God worked in Ezra's day to revive His people is how He desires to work in our day. If we are going to lead the return to God in our generation, we must learn what the remnant discovered about God when they returned to Jerusalem.

GOD CALLED HIS PEOPLE to RETURN

Everything begins with God. The Lord is working on our behalf even when we do not know it. Often, we muscle up our manpower, add together our efforts, and try to get the work done our way. The easiest thing in the world is to forget God's involvement in His work. While we are working and doing all we can, we must not forget that God is also at work.

The Word of God says in Ezra 1:1, *“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.”* The very word *fulfilled* shows us that God was behind the scenes working to bring about His plan and purpose. God was working to restore biblical faith to His people in Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

While these pitiful Jews were still living in Babylonian captivity, God raised up a king. He had this king build up an army to conquer the people who had conquered the Jews. Babylon fell to Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire.

Remember the prophecy in Isaiah 44:28, *“That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”* Perhaps it was Zerubbabel, who went to King Cyrus and said, “I want to show you something in the Word of God. Long before you were born and before your kingdom was brought together as a confederacy of the Medes and Persians, God said He would raise you up to bring the time of the captivity of His people to an end. You are the king who is to say that God's people may go back to Jerusalem to restore biblical faith.”

When Cyrus saw his name in the Word of God, He declared that the God of the Hebrews, Jehovah, was the true God, the God of heaven. He announced that all the Jews in his kingdom

Will You Return?

could go back. Those who answered the call were not returning to obey King Cyrus. They knew they had been called by God.

While we are doing our work, God is always doing His work. He told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would come into the world convicting of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Christ suffered that judgment when He took the punishment of our sin on Himself and became sin for us. The Bible says of our Lord Jesus, “*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.*” (II Corinthians 5:21).



God’s work is not one-sided. If you think it is all on your shoulders to make it happen, you are wrong. Whatever it is that God has given you to do, remember, He is purposefully working on your behalf in the lives of individuals to create an atmosphere and a time for His work to move forward. You must only obey and allow Him to work through your life.

ALL GOD’S PEOPLE WERE CALLED

King Cyrus decreed, “*The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people?*” All the Jews were free to go back to their homeland.

Not everyone takes hold of God’s Word and lets God’s Word take hold of them. I am a “*whosoever will*” man. I do not think we can give the gospel to the wrong person. If we give the gospel to a saved person, he should rejoice that he is hearing it. If we give the gospel to an unsaved person, it is his only way of salvation. Christ died for every man.

We ought to be going after every person no matter what he looks like or what language he speaks. It is not about who fits in our group, but who we are responsible to reach. The Bible says, “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mark 16:15). “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16).



*Who is there
among all His
people who will
hear His
voice and
follow Him?*

Every Christian should be a faithful witness. Witnessing is going in the power of the Holy Spirit, giving a clear presentation of the gospel, and bringing people to the place of receiving or rejecting Jesus Christ. Yes, salvation is of the Lord, but we must give the gospel witness.

The word *witness* can be used as a noun or a verb. The noun comes before the verb. We are witnesses (Luke 24:48). As witnesses, we must witness concerning Christ as the only way of salvation. The most powerful tool we have in witnessing is our personal testimony.

I am a Christian because of a Sunday School teacher. I lived in nineteen different places before I was in the third grade. When I was in the third grade, we moved into a house across the street from a high school in Maryville, Tennessee.

The high school football coach was a man by the name of Ken Shepherd. Eventually, someone wanted me to attend more than the football practices and games. I was told that Mr. Shepherd had a Sunday School class.

Finally, as a junior high student, I made my way to his Sunday School. Gospel workers found out that I was there in his class and came after me with the gospel. The class was small enough

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to single me out from all the other things going on at the First Baptist Church of Maryville. They targeted me to tell me about the Lord. Through that Sunday School class, someone confronted me with the gospel and explained to me the way of salvation.

That was the first time I had heard how to be saved, and that day I came to know Christ as my personal Saviour. I asked God to forgive my sin and invited Christ into my life. Everything else the Lord has allowed me to accomplish for His glory with my life is because a Sunday School teacher obeyed God and shared the gospel with me.

In America, the river of God's wrath is being held back by the presence of God's people and the work of the Holy Spirit. But someday the dam will break. When it does, the river of God's wrath will roll over this nation, and the blood of millions of unborn children will be avenged.

Over fifty-four million babies in America have been aborted since the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. What else can be done to destroy the family and the home? This is the first time in human history we can say the word *marriage* without everyone knowing that we mean the union between a man and a woman. The answer to this confusion is in the Word of God. Read what God said about the foundation and function of the family as He designed it (Genesis 2:24).

The Word of God says in Lamentations 4:11, "*The LORD hath accomplished his fury; he hath poured out his fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof.*" Lamentations is God's heart-cry concerning the punishment of His own people. It describes the city of Jerusalem lying in smoldering ruins.

How did this happen? When Zedekiah, the king of Judah, turned to Egypt for help, Nebuchadnezzar said, "That's it," and sent his

In every situation of life, there is a remnant of people through whom God is working. The remnant is not simply whoever is left. Within those who are left, the remnant is made of those who are surrendered to the Lord and serving God. Those are the people to whom and through whom the Lord works in a mighty way.

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armies to make their final siege on Jerusalem. Eventually, the city fell and the enemy broke through the walls. King Zedekiah had to watch his children be put to death, his eyes were burned out, and then he was put in a cage like an animal and carried away with the people to be mocked by their captors in Babylon. No one would have ever imagined the destruction that would come to that great city Jerusalem.

When God's wrath is unleashed, our land will be left worse than the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem. In Lamentations 4:12, the Word of God tells us that no one would have ever believed this could have happened to Jerusalem. America seems impregnable, but our sin will find us out. While God is holding back His judgment on America, we have a window of time to work for Him. Will you return to the Lord and let God use you?

When Jesus came into Capernaum, the crowds thronged Him, but a pitiful, helpless and nearly hopeless woman who had suffered from an issue of blood for nearly twelve years heard that the Son of God was coming. She touched the hem of His garment, the issue of her blood dried up, and she was healed and saved.

Hundreds of people were brushing up against Him, but there was a certain woman who had desperation and desired the Lord. As weak as she must have been, she fought her way through the crowd, seeking the Lord, until she got near enough to Him to touch His garment. Who among us is desperate enough to reach out to touch His garment? Many were there, but only this woman was desperate for God.

Are you willing to seek God like never before? We must thirst for the Lord and pray for revival. We do not need to learn how to do anything else. We need to come to the end of ourselves so that no matter how many ideas we have, we know all is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. We need what only God can do.

ONLY a REMNANT RETURNED

After the call went out, the Bible tells us in Ezra 1:5,

Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

Although all of God's people were called to return to Jerusalem, not all were ready to leave Babylon. This first group returned with Zerubbabel and began the work God had given them to do. Seventy-eight years later, Ezra arrived to lead the next generation of God's people.

In Ezra 7:9-10, the Bible tells us that Ezra prepared himself so that when his opportunity came to return, he was ready. Ezra believed God's Word, and he knew the Word of God well enough to teach it to others. Before Ezra left for Jerusalem, the king offered him aid, but he said, "No, God is enough." He did not say it ungratefully, but he said to himself, "I am ashamed to tell the king we need reinforcements and troops because I told him God would provide, and God is providing." The remnant that returned with Ezra exercised faith in God because they trusted in God's Word.

Ezra had been born in Babylon, but he was not content to stay there. Years after the first remnant returned with Zerubbabel, Ezra also answered the call and began leading the people back to God. The Holy Spirit used him to record all the Lord did with the first remnant that had returned, how the Lord led Ezra back, and how God worked through His people in the years that followed.

It is no accident that you and I are alive at this moment. God has you where you are for such a time as this. Good men and women have paid a great price. They have stayed and worked at it, but our faith must be contended for in every generation. We cannot pass our experience on to the next generation, but we must give them the truth.

Your New Beginning of Obedience

- Memorize and meditate on these verses.

Next to each verse, write what is taught about the gospel.

Mark 16:15

John 3:16

II Corinthians 5:21

- Write out your personal testimony of how you came to know Christ as your Saviour so you are prepared to share it with others.

Include these three parts:

- 1. My life before I was saved.*
- 2. How I came to know the Lord Jesus.*
- 3. How Christ is working in my life now.*

- Find someone you love and share your testimony with that person.