

Why Celebrate Freedom?

Growing up as a Christian in a free country, I recall from an early age taking personal pride in my American homeland as a beacon of liberty to the nations. As a boy I learned to stand up, hand over heart, to sing the praises of “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” These were not just empty words to me, but represented all that I knew and loved about my country. As I grew, I came to firmly believe that it was [our founding fathers’ belief in God](#) that had enabled them to devise a governing system that [would “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity,”](#) as enshrined in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

However, God’s people have not always been free to worship as they chose. [Whose idea was freedom of worship to begin with?](#)

The Bible clearly documents that [God was the Prime Mover behind freedom of worship, and not mere men](#). Rulers may have had their role to play, but God was all along the One Who was orchestrating His people’s deliverance from those who would conspire to destroy them.

[Religious freedom was basically unknown in the ancient world](#). It’s astonishing to learn that historians widely acknowledge that the first time that freedom of worship was actually practiced was in the kingdom of Persia, the country we now know as Iran.

It could be argued that Persia was the world’s first superpower, eventually conquering the vestiges of former rivals including Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Ethiopia and Greece. After becoming the largest and most powerful empire on earth, Persia established the world’s first religiously and culturally tolerant government, comprising more than 23 different peoples from the Indus to the Mediterranean.

Persia’s Cyrus the Great set forth his enlightened governing principles in the Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder bearing a royal inscription that was first discovered in the late nineteenth century and is now on display at the British Museum in London. [The Cyrus Cylinder was the](#)

[world's first charter of human rights](#), predating the Magna Carta by nearly 2,000 years.

Cyrus believed that men were innately free, and that religion should not force men to believe. He called for both religious and ethnic freedom, banning slavery and allowing conquered peoples to rule their countries and to follow their religion. He gave permission for all the Jews living anywhere in his empire to return to their own country, and to build the temple at Jerusalem.

Cyrus's innovation in governance was not unknown to America's founding fathers. Both Franklin and Jefferson were great admirers of Cyrus. Jefferson owned two well-marked copies of the Greek biography of Cyrus called *Cyropaedia*, which extolled his virtues as a benevolent ruler.

What made Cyrus different from other pagan rulers was that he governed through tolerance and inclusion, even going so far as to order the return of stolen religious images to their original sanctuaries, including the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar has seized from the Temple in Jerusalem.

Despite all these magnanimous acts, Cyrus himself was not a believer, but remained a Zoroastrian throughout his life, paying homage to gods such as Bel, Nebo and Marduk. [What then caused Cyrus to be so merciful? From where did he draw his inspiration?](#)

To arrive at an answer to this question, we must go back and examine Cyrus's origins. [Cyrus was not just the son of a Persian king; his mother was the great believing woman Esther!](#) Learning this one fact gives us a window into factors that would have helped to form his sterling character growing up.

[Although Cyrus was not raised as a Jew, he would have learned from his mother how before his birth, she and her people were saved from destruction](#) when she boldly went to his father the king without being summoned, and then had the opportunity to alert him to Haman's plot to destroy her people. Her courage in listening to the admonitions

of her cousin Mordecai led to the king's decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves from all those who would try to annihilate them. This is described in

Esther 9:1:

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day **when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.**

How this story of his family's personal deliverance must have made an impression on young Cyrus's mind! The importance of defending the freedom of others to worship as they choose must have been instilled in him from an early age.

In the twentieth year of his father Astyages' reign, **when Cyrus was only twelve years old, another incident further confirmed his inclination towards religious freedom.**

Nehemiah 2:1-8:

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes [whose name was **Astyages — the father of Cyrus**], when wine was before him, I [Nehemiah] took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid.

I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.”

And the king [Astyages] said to me (the queen sitting beside him [being [Esther — the mother of Cyrus](#)]), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province [called] Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah,

and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

After this decree, Nehemiah paid his first visit to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the wall. At this time, he would have been able to obtain a copy of the Hebrew scrolls by which he would have later been able to instruct the young Cyrus.

Astyages' proclamation was the first in a sequence of events that led, over the period of a half a century, to the return of a remnant of God's people to Jerusalem culminating in the rebuilding of the Temple.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar — Astyages' brother-in-law — was the pagan ruler who had originally taken Israel into captivity, exiling them to Babylon. When years later Nebuchadnezzar descended into madness, Astyages began to rule as regent over the kingdom along with his son Cyrus, who was designated co-regent.

Daniel 5:29-31:

Then Belshazzar [the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar] gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold

was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king [the ruler of Babylon] was killed.

And Darius the Mede [this is a title referring to the Persian king Astyages] received the kingdom [Babylon], being about sixty-two years old.

It was at this point that Babylon came under the rule of the 62-year-old Astyages and his 40-year-old son Cyrus. Now that he was king, Cyrus held sway, not just over Persia, but also over Babylon. He took the opportunity to make the following decree.

Ezra 1:1-4:

In the first year [as ruler] 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:](#)

“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.

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.

And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

[What inspired Cyrus to take this action?](#) This is where the story gets really intriguing.

As previously mentioned, Nehemiah would have shared with Cyrus in his youth all that the prophets had written about these events, long before they ever happened. The prophet Isaiah had actually prophesied of Cyrus 137 years before he was born! Look at

Isaiah 44:28:

who [God] says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"

You would think such a man must have been a believer himself in order for God to have prophesied of his coming. But look what God says about him in the verses immediately following!

Isaiah 45:1-5:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed:

"I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron [when Cyrus took over in Babylon, there was no opposition],

I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, *I name you, though you do not know me.*

I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; *I equip you, though you do not know me,*

"For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, *though you do not know me.*" "I equip you, *though you do not know me.*"

Why? *God was doing this on behalf of His people.*

Isaiah 45:6:

that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; **I am the LORD, and there is no other.**

Clearly, God was the One Who originally inspired the vision of religious freedom. Cyrus was simply acting on God's instruction as received through the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Now that we've read Isaiah's prophecy, let's look at what Jeremiah had to say about God's plan of deliverance:

Jeremiah 29:10,11:

"For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

God's plan for Israel's future would give them hope.

Jeremiah 29:12-14:

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

God would provide everything His people needed to be restored, including religious freedom in the political realm. Cyrus would play an important part in this unfolding drama.

The last verse in the Hebrew Canon captures Cyrus's edict. (Take note that the order of books in the original Hebrew Canon is different than that of the Christian Old Testament; the last book in the Hebrew Canon is actually Chronicles and not Malachi. This means that the final verses of the Scripture in the time of Christ were actually 2 Chronicles 36:22 and 23.) Let's read this proclamation together.

2 Chronicles 36:22,23:

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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:**

"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. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'"

Why would God devote such prominent space in the Scripture to the words of an unbelieving king? *Because **this was God's project, not his!***

Cyrus was speaking about the Temple. Jesus Christ had not yet come, and there would need to be a Temple in Jerusalem for him to visit during his earthly sojourn.

When we understand all these connections, we begin to realize that **God was the One Who had from the beginning set in motion everything pertaining to His people's release and repatriation.** This is why, in the days of Esther and Mordecai, **God instituted a festival for His people to celebrate the freedom of worship** He had facilitated on their behalf. **The festival was called Purim,** meaning "lots," **signifying the triumph of God's timing over man's plots** which they endeavored to assure by the casting of lots.

Proverbs has this to say about the casting of lots.

Proverbs 16:33:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Or, to put it in terms of our modern culture, the New Living Translation, or NLT renders this verse: “We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall.” Indeed!

The Book of Esther records the origins of the festival of Purim.

Esther 9:24-28:

For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them.

But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them,

the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year,

that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that [these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.](#)

[Purim was from the beginning meant to be a celebration of freedom of worship for God’s people.](#) We too should celebrate God’s good

hand upon us that allows us to enjoy “a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way,” as it says in 1 Timothy 2:2.

As we reflect upon the blessings of liberty, we can take comfort in the words of Isaiah.

Isaiah 46:8-11:

“Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors,

remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; **I am God, and there is none like me,**

declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’

calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country [in the context which we already read, this is speaking about Cyrus of Persia]. **I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.**

Why celebrate freedom? Because, according to

Psalms 118:23:

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

Freedom is God's idea, not man's. He knows the end from the beginning, His counsel will stand and He will accomplish all His purpose. **We need not fret about all the evildoers of our day; He has purposed freedom for His people and He will do it!**