



STORY

Return from the Captivity and the Rebuilding of the Temple - Ezra 1-10, Nehemiah 1-8

TEACHER PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I thank You for the grace and mercy You revealed in preserving Your chosen Old Testament people Israel. You brought them home to the land promised to Abraham and made sure that the promise of the Messiah would be fulfilled in the fullness of the time. Bless this hour we spend in Your Word. Amen.

VOCABULARY

Cyrus - king of Persia who signed the decree returning the Jews to their homeland

Zerubbabel - descendant of King Jehoiachin, who led the first expedition

Jeshua or Joshua - the high priest and religious leader

Darius - King of the Medes

Ezra - a priest or scribe

Nehemiah - cupbearer of the king of Persia, who led the third expedition

Samaritan - a mixed race of people with a mixture of religious beliefs despised by the Jews

OUTER AIM

God Delivered His People From Their Captivity and Brought Them Back to the Promised Land

INNER AIM

God Delivers Us from Every Trial

BACKGROUND

Ezra continues the Old Testament history of the chosen people of God, the Jewish nation. The northern kingdom of Israel disappeared from the stage of history when it was taken into the Assyrian Captivity (722 BC) because of its wickedness and unbelief. The Southern kingdom of Judah was not much better. However, because of the promise of the Messiah, God preserved the tribe of Judah. In 512 BC, the kingdom of Judah was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. The Babylonian Empire was replaced by the Medes and the Persians.

Ezra shows how God fulfilled His promise to return His people to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After seventy years of captivity, a remnant of the Jews chose to leave Babylon and return to the Promised Land.

Ezra relates the story of two returns from Babylon: the first led by Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1-6), and the second under the leadership of Ezra, the scribe, to rebuild the spiritual condition of the people (Ezra 7-10). Sandwiched between these two accounts is a gap of nearly sixty years. Nehemiah is a contemporary of Ezra and leads the third and last return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. Nehemiah challenges God's people to rebuild the shattered walls of Jerusalem. In spite of opposition, the walls are rebuilt in only fifty-two days.

STUDENT PRAYER

Dear Jesus, help us today to understand Your perfect love for all people. We thank You that You came to seek and to save that which was lost. We ask that You bless our study this morning so that we may understand Your grace in our lives. Help us to realize how important it is that we hear and keep Your Word. Deliver us from every evil of body and life. Amen.

PRESENTATION

Introduction:

The return of the Jewish people in Exile was no accident of history. Isaiah had prophesied that it would happen through King Cyrus who would set the captives free (Isaiah 44:24-45:13). The Lord had revealed through Jeremiah that the Babylonian Captivity would last for only seventy years. All this was put into motion by the intercessory prayer of Daniel.

I. The work of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)

The Lord caused King Cyrus II of Persia to issue a decree authorizing the return of the Jews to Palestine. He also returned them to the gold, silver, and vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken when the temple had been destroyed. Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest, led 49,897 Israelites back to Palestine in 537 BC. It is probable that Sheshbassar and Zerubbabel were the same person. After the fall of Jerusalem, there were no kings from David's family who reigned. This heightened the anticipation when Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah-King.

The returnees proceeded to build an altar at Jerusalem. The various offerings commanded by Moses were reinstated and the Feast of Tabernacles was observed. In fact the foundation for the new temple was also laid. Some of the older people wept because this second temple was so inferior to the temple Solomon had built.

The Samaritans were Jews who had remained in Palestine when Judah was carried off into captivity. They had intermarried with the heathen people in the area and their religion was part true and part pagan. (Cf. John 4) Zerubbabel and Jeshua refused the offer of Samaritans to help in order to prevent their worship life from being corrupted by the watered down religion of the Samaritans. The Samaritans then did everything possible to frustrate the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:4-5). The temple project came to a halt for sixteen years until it was restarted under Darius, King of Persia. It took twenty years to finish the rebuilding of the temple. To encourage His people, the Lord sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to His people. Darius found the original decree of Cyrus and authorized money from the treasury to complete the work.

II. The Second Return and the Reforms of Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

Note that there is a gap of about fifty-eight years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. The second large contingent of exiles returned to Jerusalem eighty years after the first under the leadership of Ezra, a priest. Ezra had studied the Mosaic law and sought to put it into practice (Ezra 7:10). Ezra returned with about 1,800 men and their families from Babylon during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Artaxerxes gave Ezra full authority to function officially in Judah with the backing of the Persian king. This included government funding.

Ezra recruited Levites (priests from the tribe of Levi) for the journey. Even though they did not have a military escort, the Lord protected this small group (Ezra 8:31). When they reached Jerusalem, they presented Burnt Offerings and Sin Offerings to the Lord. They also presented the legal documents from Artaxerxes (Ezra 7-8).

It came as a surprise to Ezra (not a surprise in view of the history of Israel) that many of the Jews, who had returned, had defected from the worship of Jehovah. This included the “officials and chief men” (Ezra 9:2). This so distressed Ezra that he pulled the hair from his head and beard. Ezra, then in a lengthy prayer, confessed Israel’s guilt and reminded them of Israel’s past wrongdoing. He also reminded them of God’s judgments and God’s grace in bringing them back from captivity. Listen to Ezra’s words, “And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, {14} should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor? {15} O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this.” (Ezra 9:13-15)

The chief issue was the intermarriage with the pagan women of the nations around them. The priests and Levites led a move “to put away all these wives and their children” (Ezra 10:3). The people responded with a confession of sins and an amending of their sinful actions. Later John the Baptist would call upon Israel to “bring forth fruits in keeping with their repentance.” In spite of the fact that divorce was forbidden, the preservation of the religious obedience of Israel was more important. This was to be a time of repentance and renewal for Israel.

III. Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-7)

About ninety years had passed since the returned exiles had been in Judea. The temple had been rebuilt under Ezra, but they had never succeeded in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. God used Nehemiah, to accomplish His purposes. Nehemiah, like Esther, was a resident of Susa, and he was the cupbearer for Artaxerxes, the King. The cupbearer was responsible for tasting the wine for the king (cf. Joseph in prison). Nehemiah learned that the Jews in Judea were in trouble and that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were in bad shape.

When Artaxerxes wondered why Nehemiah was so sad, Nehemiah told him about the problems in Judea. Nehemiah asked for a leave of absence and documents authorizing him to procure the needed materials to finish the wall. Nehemiah was given a twelve-year leave of absence and the rank of “governor.” Nehemiah laid down the “mission.” “Then I said to them, ‘You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.’” (Nehemiah 2:17).

This work was opposed by Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah of Ammon, and Geshem of Arabia. Because of the danger, Nehemiah wanted to get the walls rebuilt as fast as possible. He assigned work parties to certain sections of the gates and defensive towers so that work on the wall could go on simultaneously. When the walls were about half height, Nehemiah got wind of a surprise attack by their enemies. Nehemiah organized the workers so that half of them worked on construction while the other half stood guard duty. Even those who worked were equipped with swords.

Unfortunately, there were also internal forces at work which threatened the success of God’s people. Some of the Jews, contrary to provisions of the Old Testament Law, were taking interest from their fellow Jews. Priests, too, were guilty of lovelessness. Nehemiah sought to institute a spiritual reform.

There also were plots to kill Nehemiah and appeals to Artaxerxes to stop the project. In spite of this, the walls were rebuilt in a record fifty-two days. Nehemiah also sought to get people to move into the city of Jerusalem.

IV. The Renewal of the Covenant (Nehemiah 8-12:26)

On the first day of the seventh month, the Jews assembled in Jerusalem in order to read the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law had been greatly neglected. Ezra read the law from early morning to noon from a platform. The Levites helped the people to understand the law (Nehemiah 8:7-8). Nehemiah and Ezra counseled the people not to grieve because of their neglect of the law but to be strengthened in the joy of the Lord's forgiveness. The next day the people learned about eight festival days required by the law including the "Festival of Booths."

Then the people participated in their last known covenant-renewal ceremony. This included expressions of repentance, readings from the law (five books of Moses), and confessions of sins. Ezra led a prayer for the people (Nehemiah 9:6-37). This included a history of Israel's ingratitude and rebellion (the Law), Jehovah's forgiving nature and His acts of love and mercy toward the people (the Gospel). At this time many people signed a document reaffirming their obedience to the Mt. Sinai covenant. They pledged to live according to the law of God. This included refraining from two common practices - marrying pagans and profaning the Sabbath. They also were to support the work of the Temple by an annual tax and by observing the laws regarding the tithes (tenth of income).

V. The Dedication of the Walls and Nehemiah's Second Visit (Nehemiah 12:27-13:31)

The walls of Jerusalem were dedicated with great joy. After the priests purified themselves, they purified the people, the walls, and the gates. They ended up at the temple where sacrifices were offered in gratitude for the renewal of joy the Lord had brought into the lives of these transplanted exiles. Persons were appointed to take charge of the collection and the distribution of the tithes. The orders of singers and gatekeepers begun by David were reestablished.

His work finished, Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes in Susa. When Nehemiah left, things reverted to type. So Nehemiah had to return and deal with the following problems. The High Priest had made peace with Tobiah, the Ammonite, and even had housed him in the Temple. The people were neglecting the support of the Levites by withholding tithes. There also was widespread neglect of the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18). Lastly, many were involved in mixed marriages including a grandson of the High Priest (Nehemiah 13:4-31).

APPLICATION

God keeps His promises. In the return from exile, God kept His promise to return His people from Babylon after seventy years. More important, God was keeping His promise to send a Messiah to deliver His people. Explore the promises that God has kept in the lives of your children.

God controls the affairs of mighty nations to bring about the saving of many people. Consider how God used the Roman Empire to make sure that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and provided for the spread of the Gospel throughout the world. God still controls the events of history for the good of those who love Him.

God's Old Testament people continually tested the mercy and patience of God. These examples are written for our learning that we do not fall away through sin. God's people tended to ignore the study of Scriptures.

When God's people came back from the Exile, they were more interested in rebuilding their own expensive houses, than in building a house of worship for the Lord. How do we today allow our priorities to become mixed up and confused?

God always preserves a remnant or small remainder of believers no matter how affairs may deteriorate in society or our nation. This is the lesson of the story of Ezra and Nehemiah.

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.

Joshua 24:15 - "But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Haggai 1:4 - "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"

Matthew 15:8-9 - "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. {9} And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

HYMN CHOICES

Great Is the Lord, Our God - TLH #636

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah - TLH #54

Built on the Rock the Church doth Stand - TLH #467