



**Sunday School Lesson for November 26, 2006
Released on November 22, 2006**

“God Offered Return and Restoration”

Printed Text: 2 Chronicles 26:22, 23 (used as cross reference); Ezra 1:1-7

Background Scripture: 2 Chronicles 26:22, 23; Ezra 1:5-7

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 29:10-14

2 Chronicles 36:22, 23

22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, 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,

23 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.

Ezra 1:1-7

1 Now in the first year of Cy'rus king of Per'sia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jer-emi'ah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cy'rus king of Per'sia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and *put it* also in writing, saying,

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Per'sia, 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 Je-ru'salem, which *is* in Ju'dah.

3 Who *is there* among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Je-ru'sa-lem, which *is* in Ju'dah, and build the house of the LORD God of Is'ra-el, (he *is* the God,) which *is* in Je-ru'sa-lem.

4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that *is* in Je-ru'sa-lem.

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Ju'dah and Ben'ja-min, and the priests, and the Le'vites, with all *them* whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which *is* in Je-ru'sa-lem.

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all *that* was willingly offered.

7 Also Cy'rus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Neb-u-chad-nez'zar had brought forth out of Je-ru'salem, and had put them in the house of his gods.

INTRODUCTION

The Chronicles Factor

Most students of the Bible believe that the books of Chronicles were written after the Babylonian captivity and after God's people had returned home to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. (Their return is the topic of today's lesson.) It is worth noting that the final two verses of 2 Chronicles and the first three verses of the book of Ezra are virtually the same. Because of this, some have proposed that Ezra may have been the author of the books of Chronicles as well as the book that bears his name. Certainly Ezra was well qualified for such a task (see Ezra 7:6, 10).

Why would Ezra (assuming him to be the author) compose such a record as that found in the books of Chronicles? Consider the following hypothetical situation: A congregation experiences an especially trying set of circumstances, such as a fire that destroys its sanctuary, a split of some kind, or a crisis within the leadership. The result would likely be a keen sense of loss of purpose and direction within the congregation. Questions would surface, such as, "Where do we go from here?" and "What is God's will for us now?" How would a church in such a situation get the people back on track and restore a sense of direction and purpose?

One answer might be to call attention to the history of the congregation and review God's faithfulness over the years in preserving the people through other difficult times. By considering such examples from the congregation's history, the people may be encouraged to continue to "fight the good fight." They would do what was necessary to see themselves through the current series of events.

A similar scenario confronted God's people following the crisis of the Babylonian captivity and the return to their homeland. They too must have wondered, "Where do we go from here? Does God still have a purpose for us?" For God's covenant people, there were other burning issues as well: "Is God's covenant still intact? Are the promises made to Abraham and David still binding?"

The material found in 1 and 2 Chronicles seems especially intended (through the guidance of the Holy Spirit) to address these and other crucial issues in the minds of those who were part of the rebuilding effort in Judah. The genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9 would not have been dull or boring to the original readers; they would have given the postexilic generation a sense of identity with their past. They would have been encouraged by realizing that the link with the individuals and tribes mentioned in these chapters had not been severed by the captivity and exile.

There is a special emphasis in 1 and 2 Chronicles on the reigns of David and Solomon and all their achievements. This let the postexilic community know that this was still a part of their history and their identity. God was not finished with them yet!

LESSON BACKGROUND

The conclusion of the background scripture, 2 Chronicles, is a key part of the previously mentioned encouragement to the postexilic community. As we learned from last week's text, God's people had repeatedly spurned the appeals of His prophets to turn from their sins. Eventually, His judgment fell. God used the Babylonians to destroy the temple – believed by some in Jerusalem and Judah to be indestructible. That belief was based on a theory that God would never allow His people to be overtaken by pagans (compare Jeremiah 7:4).

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to study how God restored His people after the years of exile and punishment.

Principle: to show that when we turn back to God in repentance, God delights in restoring us.

Application: to demonstrate that we ought to turn back to God without delay so that we are open to His process of restoration in our lives.

1. How are 2 Chronicles and Ezra tied together?

Both of these books mention king Cyrus. Note, the final two verses (2 Chronicles 36:22-23), are the same verses repeated almost word for word in Ezra beginning verses, 1:1-3.

2. What had the Prophet Jeremiah said would happen after seventy years (extra credit, not in lesson text)?

In Jeremiah 25:12, the prophet prophesied – “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. This made reference to the demise of Babylon and the rise of Persia under Cyrus. The Lord also declared, "After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you (the Jews), and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place (Jerusalem)" (Jer. 29:10).

3. What did God do to get Cyrus involved in fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy? (Ezra 1:1)

In verse 1, God had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing. The motivation for what he proclaimed was directly from God in heaven and God used this pagan king as an instrument to do His will. As was prophesied in Isaiah 44:28, God said Cyrus will perform all of His pleasures. After Cyrus gained control of Babylon in 539 B.C., he made it his policy to let captive peoples in the empire return to their original homes. The proclamation regarding the Jews was part of God's overall plan.

4. How is Cyrus's claim to have all the kingdoms of the world to be explained? (vs. 2)

In this verse, Cyrus said, "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth." We have to view this claim in a restricted sense. Cyrus was saying that all of the nations in this empire were under his control. He governed a large part of the Middle East and probably sent out tentacles to see whether he could pick up new territories in various directions. Let us note that Cyrus was not a believer in Israel's God (Isa. 45:4-5), but he did hold Yahweh in high esteem (Ezra 1:3).

5. What had God charged Cyrus to do for Jerusalem? (vs. 1-2)

In verse 2, Cyrus knew the only reason he had control of all nations in the Persian empire was due to the will of God. It was Cyrus's conclusion that God had charged him with the mission of building Him a house (temple) at Jerusalem in Judah. Cyrus was under the mighty hand of God's power. God also persuaded him to do what He wanted done with Jews who chose to return to Judah.

6. What two charges did Cyrus give to Jews in his Kingdom? (vs. 3-4)

After Cyrus received his charge from God, he then gave two charges to the Jews. He said for all those (Jews) in his empire who were loyal to Yahweh should trust Him to go with them as they return to Judah in Jerusalem (charge #1). In other words, they (Jews) were free to return back to their land. There they would rebuild the house (temple) of the Lord God of Israel, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. This was also prophesied by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 45:13). Fulfilled prophecy is a great testimony to the veracity of God's Word, and it gives strong hope to Christians. It can also be an effective witnessing tool to show that God means what He says.

As we look deeper into these verses, what an announcement this was for the homesick Jews to hear. Great joy must have replaced the discouragement and depression some had felt (reflect back on Psalm 137:1-6). Not only was permission granted for any interested exile to go back to Jerusalem, but to hear they had the freedom to rebuild the temple of God must have created quite a stir in the Jewish community.

In today's time, we have those who are shut-up in nursing homes, hospital rooms, and other barriers, that may prevent one from assembling with believers but thank God for those such as the Mission and other believers, who bring worship services to those who are not able to do so on their own. God always makes a way when we turn our hearts toward him.

The second charge given by Cyrus to the Jews was to contribute resources to those who elected to undertake the long trip back to Judah and the physically demanding task of rebuilding the house of God in Jerusalem. Not only would they be rebuilding the temple but they would also have to rebuild other buildings as well, not to mention homes in which to live, shops and market stalls in which to work, and city walls to protect them from their enemies. They would also have to nurture and bring back to life the outlying areas such as farms, vineyards and orchards. It was Cyrus' command that all Jews in the Persian Empire participate in this project whether they were staying behind or going back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:4).

We must realize that God has all the resources we need to be restored. He only seeks a willing and repentant heart.

7. What did God do to get the Jews ready to return to Judah? (vs. 5)

Just as God had done in the spirit of Cyrus (vs. 1), a pagan king, He raised the spirit of the elders of Judah and Benjamin, the priests, the Levites (people from the tribe of Levi, from which priests and temple workers came), and other assorted individuals so that they were motivated to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem.

Note: They two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, were the primary makeup of the southern kingdom of Judah, which the Babylonians had conquered and taken captive. Also, everyone who decided to return to Judah, were moved by the spirit of God.

8. What kinds of things did the Jews remaining in Persia give to the exiles who were returning to Judah? (vs. 6)

Every Jew (whether they were staying or leaving Persia) was summoned to aid the returning exiles in any way they could and they did. They were obedient and provided assistance to the exiles in all ways possible. This included contributing resources such as silver, gold, supplies, beasts (domesticated animals used for transportation, food, hair, wool, and hide products), and freewill offerings to get materials for the rebuilding of the house of God in Jerusalem.

9. What did Cyrus return to the Jews that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem? (vs. 7)

In last week's lesson, we learned of how God's people were taken into captivity by the Chaldeans (Babylonians) and into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. After conquering God's people, Nebuchadnezzar brought all the vessels of the house of God to Babylon. His successor/son, Belshazzar, had used these vessels in an unholy way (Dan. 5 1-4).

The removal of articles from a conquered people's place of worship is a significant religious statement in the ancient world. It is interpreted as a sign of the superiority of the conqueror's gods. In this case the Lord God of Israel, who had allowed the Babylonians to remove the articles from His temple, now allows the Persians to send

them back. Cyrus brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon, and had them returned to Jerusalem. Ezra 1:11 gives a count of 5,400 vessels of gold and silver that was brought back.

CONCLUSION

In this week's lesson we have seen how God longs to restore His people. As noted earlier, the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were most likely written to encourage the returning exiles that God still had a purpose for them and that captivity did not spell "the end." Both the conclusion of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra highlight the fact that God took the initiative in fulfilling His promise. He did that by moving the heart of Cyrus and then moving His people to take the necessary steps to return to Judah and rebuild. If ever there were doubts in the minds of those who returned from captivity concerning God's intentions, they needed only to look back and remember God's grace in using the right man at the right time to achieve His holy purpose.

One could speculate about why it took seventy years of captivity and exile before God took action. This could be a great concluding discussion for the class. Could it be that if the people had repented earlier, God might have moved sooner? Your class discussion could bring out some interesting and helpful thoughts on this.

In a lesson such as this, it is important to make some personal application. Yes, God simply waits for us to return to Him in repentance before He acts on our behalf. He does not force His ways on us. He invites us to participate in His plans and waits for us to respond.

PRAYER

Heavenly, where would we be without Your grace? We would be hopelessly lost. Thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and reconcile us back to you with our repenting hearts. Helps us to realize that when you make a promise to your people, you've already provided the resources to fulfill that promise. Oh, Heavenly Father, your Grace is Sufficient! Remind us of our responsibility as believers to share that grace with others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember:

God is still in the business of rebuilding and restoring.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson: **Who is Jesus Christ?** Study Colossians 1:15-23.

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Have a blessed Thanksgiving!