

October 11, 2026 (Lesson 6)

RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY

1. The Jews Return From Captivity (Ezra 1:1-5; 2:1, 64-70)
2. Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 3:1-13)
3. The Temple Completed (Ezra 4:1-5, 24; 5:1-2; 6:1-5, 13-17)

Central Truth: We all need salvation from captivity to sin and its effects.

Focus: Appreciate and thank God for restoring those who repent.

Evangelism Emphasis: Jesus Christ liberates people from sin.

Golden Text: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing” (Psalm 126:1-2).

The story of Judah’s exile to Babylon is one of both judgment and redemption. As we have seen in previous lessons, the Jewish people justly deserved punishment. For centuries they had rejected God’s Law and engaged in wicked idolatry. But the Exile was not the end of the story. After suffering the righteous wrath of God, and spending seventy years in exile, God’s people would once again experience the compassion and mercy of the Lord. God promised He would return them to the Promised Land, and God always keeps His promises.

After the Exile, Israel would never be the same. The history of both the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah had been full of idolatry and waywardness. Israel would still struggle with many spiritual issues. But one thing that was eradicated from their culture was idolatry. Never again would the Jewish people be prone to serve images and pagan gods. This is true even to this day.

The Jewish people highly value Eretz Yisrael, “the land of Israel.” To return to the land was a sign of God’s favor. New hope blossomed in their hearts. This was a new era, a time of redemption and restoration. Once again, they were able to live in the land of their fathers.

1. THE JEWS RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY

A. The Lord Stirs Hearts (Ezra 1:1-5)

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 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, 2 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. 3 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.

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.

The prophet Jeremiah had prophesied the Jews would be exiled for seventy years (Jer. 25:11). He also prophesied that God would return the people to the land (29:10). To fulfill this word, God would use a variety of people: a Gentile king, a Jewish priest, men of influence, and common laborers.

The Gentile king was Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. To understand how Cyrus fits into the picture, we need to review a bit of world history. Nebuchadnezzar had founded a world empire, yet the kingdom of Babylon lasted for only a few generations. They were conquered by the Medes and Persians. The story of the fall of Babylon and the Persian conquest is mentioned in Daniel 5. This conquest of Babylon was in fulfillment of God's prophetic word (Isa. 13:17-19).

Cyrus is known to history as Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great. He was the founder of the Persian Empire. He inherited a small kingdom called Persis in southern Iran near the Persian Gulf. From this base, he conquered other territories, including Media, Lydia, and Babylon. Eventually, he ruled

over a huge empire, from the Aegean Sea to the Indus River. His rule extended from modern-day Turkey to the border of India.

Cyrus was noted as a tolerant king. He allowed many captured people to return to their homelands. However, the motivation to let the Jews return to Israel was God-ordained. The Lord stirred Cyrus' heart to do this (Ezra 1:1). The prophet Isaiah had predicted this some 150 years earlier, even calling Cyrus by name (Isa. 45:1-5). Cyrus was not a worshiper of Jehovah (v. 5), but he was still used of the Lord.

With his heart moved by God, Cyrus directed that the Jews return to Israel and build a temple for the Lord (Ezra 1:2-3), fulfilling another prophecy where Cyrus was specifically named (Isa. 44:28). The king decreed anyone willing to return could do so. He also ordered that anyone who could not return should make provision for those who were returning (Ezra 1:4). Apparently, Cyrus wanted people to give gold and silver so that the travelers would have provisions for their journey. He also directed that a freewill offering be sent for the temple construction.

Upon hearing Cyrus' decree, the exiles' hearts were also "stirred" (v. 5 NLT). The word *stirred* used here is the same as in verse 1. The leaders of the various families were aroused with a vision for a new temple. Specifically mentioned are the leaders of Judah and Benjamin, the two main tribes who were exiled to Bablyon. In addition, the priests and Levites were also involved, which is important since they would be needed in the service of the temple.

\$ How was the truth of Proverbs 21:1 lived out in King Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-3)?

B. Thousands Return to Judah (Ezra 2:1, 64-70)

1 Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city.

64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore.

70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

The decree of Cyrus was for whoever was willing (Ezra 1:3). Some were not. Many chose to

remain in the lands where they had been exiled. That is why in Jesus' day there was a large Jewish population in places like Babylon. However, thousands of Israelites were stirred to return to their homeland. Ezra 2:1 says these individuals had been taken from Jerusalem and Judea. Judea is here referred to as a "province" of the Persian Empire, for it was no longer under Jewish control.

The total number of those returning was 42,360 (v. 64). This same total is mentioned in Nehemiah 7:66 also. A perplexing fact is that this number is more than the sum total of the numbers listed in Ezra 2:3-60, which is 29,818. How do we explain this? One possibility is that Ezra listed those whose genealogical records were certain (see v. 59). These additional people returned to the land, but their ancestry was not authenticated. Being able to prove one's descent was of great importance in ancient Israel, especially among the priests and Levites.

Not counted in this total were the servants of the Israelites (v. 65), of whom there were over 7,000. Considering the number of Israelites who returned, this seems like a high number of servants. Possibly it indicates the Jews were generally benevolent in their treatment of their servants, motivating many of them to accompany their masters in their journey. Previously the number of Levitical singers had been mentioned (v. 41), who were all male singers. The singers mentioned in verse 65 were men and women. These may have been secular singers who performed at weddings, funerals, and other social events (see 2 Chron. 35:25). Also numbered were the beasts of burden (Ezra 2:66-67), which would be necessary for not only carrying people and supplies to the Promised Land but later of great use in the rebuilding of the temple.

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, the tribal leaders freely gave the offerings they had brought with them for the temple construction (vv. 68-69). The amount of the offering mentioned in verse 69 is huge, probably in the tens of millions of dollars in our money. One source estimates the 61,000 "drachmas" (gold coins) would be worth \$24 million in today's currency. This had been collected from many different people, who gave sacrificially for the temple construction.

Finally, the people settled in the land (v. 70). The significance of this verse is profound. God had restored the people to their land. They were forgiven and restored. The time of judgment and exile was over. A new era of God's blessing and favor had dawned.

Yellow Ribbons

"Tie a Yellow Ribbon" is a famous pop song. It is the story of a man returning from prison, uncertain as to whether his girlfriend will still love and welcome him back. When he arrives, he sees an oak tree filled with yellow ribbons. He is not forgotten or rejected. What a poignant reminder of the joy of someone who has done wrong being forgiven and accepted!

2. REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

A. The Altar (Ezra 3:1-6)

1 And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. 2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. 3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

The people began construction during "the seventh month" (v. 1)—the Jewish month of Tishrei. This month includes the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Together, these three festivals are known as the High Holy Days. During this holy season, the returned exiles gathered in Jerusalem.

Verse 2 introduces the community leaders—Jeshua the high priest and Zerubbabel, the governor

of Judea for the Persian government. These two leaders were key players in the rebuilding of the temple (5:2).

The returned exiles did not immediately begin work on a new temple. Instead, they first built an altar of sacrifice. This was a necessity before they could do anything else. If they were to proceed, they must ensure they were in right relationship with God. This required making offerings to atone for their sins, which required an altar. The altar would become the center of their construction project, with the temple built around it. The altar was set upon its “bases” (3:3); that is, in its place. They built the altar on the exact location where it had been previously. They did this hastily, recognizing they were surrounded by enemies, so they needed God’s favor immediately.

On this altar, they “offered burnt offerings” (v. 3). A burnt offering involved the sacrifice of an entire animal, burned until it was wholly consumed. It was an act of worship and devotion to God. It also was an offering acknowledging sin and the need for God’s mercy. Leviticus 1 describes this offering. It was a “sweet savor” to the Lord (v. 9). When offered with sincere devotion and repentance, it was pleasing to the Lord—like a fragrant aroma.

After erecting the altar, there began a regular course of offerings, including daily morning and evening offerings (Ezra 3:4), monthly offerings at the new moon (v. 5), and offerings for the required festivals of the Lord—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Being the seventh month, the people celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, living in booths to commemorate their wilderness wandering after leaving Egypt. There would have also been daily offerings for this seven-day feast (see Lev. 23:34-37).

\$ Today, what role should an altar of prayer occupy?

B. The Temple’s Foundation (Ezra 3:7-13)

7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel.

12 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy.

Once the altar was built, the people began to work on the temple, using the funds they had brought with them (Ezra 3:7). They hired skilled workers, men of Tyre and Sidon, Phoenicians who lived along the Mediterranean Sea. These men provided lumber from Lebanon to use in construction. Interestingly, when Solomon built the first temple, he also hired Phoenician laborers and used cedars of Lebanon for construction (see 1 Kings 5:6-12). This work began in the second month of the year (Ezra 3:8). This also paralleled the construction of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:1).

The work was under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:8). Zerubbabel was a descendant of David, the grandson of King Jehoiachin. When Cyrus appointed him governor, it was probably an act of respect and royal graciousness. Since they were building a house of worship for God, the work was primarily under the administration of the priestly leader. Ezra also notes the Levites were appointed to oversee the construction (v. 8), probably for the same reason. The two principal foremen for the work were named Jeshua and Kadmiel (v. 9). This is not Jeshua the high priest, but a Levite (see 2:40). Each man was the head of a Levitical family (2:40).

The foundation was “laid” (3:10) on the same footprint as Solomon’s temple. The work of

building was a sacred matter. Therefore, laying the foundation was attended with worship and celebration. The priests, dressed in their priestly garments, blew trumpets. The trumpets referred to were not shofars (ram's horns), but rather the silver trumpets that were part of the temple worship equipment (Num. 10:1-3). At the same time, Levites were playing cymbals. These Levites were sons of Asaph—worship leaders and members of the Levitical choir. They sang, “For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:11 NKJV). “Give thanks to the Lord, . . . for His mercy endures forever” was a worship chorus commonly used in Levitical worship (see Pss. 118:1; 136:1; 1 Chron. 16:34 NKJV).

The phrase “they sang together” (Ezra 3:11) likely refers to antiphonal singing, which means the choir was divided into groups that sang responsively to each other. The Israelites were known to be openly expressive with their emotions. Loud cries, shouts, and tears were not uncommon, so it is not surprising that the people expressed their joyful worship “with a great shout” (v. 11). A modern example of such an emotional exhibition occurred when the Jews regained access to the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem in 1967. They laughed, wept, danced, and shouted with joy.

Verses 12-13 paint a moving and poignant picture. Most of the people were overcome with joy when the temple's foundation was laid. But there were some older priests, Levites, and community leaders who had survived decades of living in exile and had now returned, and whose joy was mixed with grief. They had seen Solomon's temple. They remembered its glory. Despite this joyous occasion, they could not help but compare what they saw with the beauty of what had been destroyed. They mourned the destruction of the previous temple, so they wept. Both the shouts of joy and the mournful weeping of the people were lifted up in an immense sound that could be heard from far away.

Transformed Through Worship

Worship changes the worshiper into the image of One worshiped.—Jack Hayford

3. THE TEMPLE COMPLETED

A. Opposition and Encouragement (Ezra 4:1-5, 24; 5:1-2)

4:4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5 And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

24 Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

5:1 Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them.

The initial effort to rebuild the temple was accompanied by worship and loud rejoicing. However, the celebration did not last long. Ezra 4 introduces us to the Jews' enemies. These were mainly the people of Samaria. They offered to help in the rebuilding, feeling they had a right to join in the construction because they worshiped the same God as Israel (v. 2).

These people had been imported into the land by the Assyrians (v. 2), and their offer was emphatically rejected by the Israelite leaders (v. 3). The people of Samaria were ethnically and religiously a mixed race—pagans who worshiped other gods but also incorporated the worship of Jehovah into their religion (see 2 Kings 17:24-41). They were part Jewish and part Gentile, and the children of Israel were under a mandate to separate themselves as a holy people for God. As His covenant nation, they were told not to intermarry with pagans, as it would result in their serving false gods (Deut. 7:3-4). This is what occurred with the people of Samaria: Pagans intermarried with Israelites, and they worshiped both idols and Jehovah (2 Kings 17:41).

Zerubbabel answered the Samaritans by declaring only the children of Israel would rebuild the

temple. He emphasized they had nothing to do with the Samaritans. He also stressed the temple was for the worship of Jehovah alone. He also cited Cyrus' decree, giving them a legal right to build. Further, Cyrus had directed it was the Jews alone who should rebuild the temple.

The Samaritans did not back down. Instead, they intimidated the Israelites. Ezra 4:4 says they "discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build" (HCSB). The picture is of a constant tormenting of the Jews, wearing them down, discouraging them, and putting fear in their hearts.

Not only did they attack the Jews directly, but they also worked against them in the royal courts. They hired agents who were likely members of the king's council, and bribed them to speak against the Jews (v. 5). Although Cyrus was still in favor of the Jews, by this time he was embroiled in several wars. The Samaritan agents took advantage of the king's troubles and continually argued for the temple work to stop. This continued throughout the reign of Cyrus and even afterward.

The Samaritans' belligerent scheme worked. The Jews were so terrified that they stopped all work for quite some time. It would be fifteen years later, during the reign of the Persian king Darius, before work would resume on the temple (4:24).

After years of delay, the Lord once again stirred the people to renew construction, using two prophets for this purpose (5:1-2). First was Haggai, and then some months later, Zechariah. Reading the words of these men of God, especially Haggai 1:1-9, we understand the initial fear felt by the Jews had given way to apathy and laziness. The prophets called the people to renew their dedication to God and to build a house of worship. Hearing the word of the Lord through his prophets, Jeshua and Zerubbabel decided to resume work on the temple.

Fear-Curing Fear

We fear men so much because we fear God so little. One fear cures another. When man's terror scares you, turn your thoughts on the wrath of God.—William Gurnall

B. Approval, Completion, and Dedication (Ezra 6:1-5, 13-17)

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. 14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. 16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Construction was resumed during the reign of Darius. But enemy leaders, specifically "Tattenai" and "Shethar-Bozenai," petitioned the king regarding the Jews' work (Ezra 5:3 NIV). They questioned the legitimacy of the Jews' construction efforts. To investigate the matter, Darius had the royal archives searched. There he found Cyrus' decree (6:3-5). In this decree, Cyrus instructed: (1) that the temple should be rebuilt; (2) where it should be located (on the original foundation), and the size of the building; (3) that expenses for the project should come from the royal treasury; and (4) that the temple vessels pillaged by Nebuchadnezzar should be returned. This not only exonerated the Jews' efforts but prompted the king to order that all materials necessary for the project be provided. The Jews' enemies were forced to comply and supply the Israelites with everything they needed (v. 13). This included funds, building materials, animals for sacrifice, and priestly items.

With the approval and provision of the king, the construction moved along. Things prospered and went well under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (v. 14). After five years of work, the temple was completed in the sixth year of the reign

of King Darius (v. 15).

As with the laying of the foundation, the completion of the temple was a cause for great celebration (v. 16). Once again, the people of God had a house of God for worship. Once again, they had a place to make atonement for sin and honor their Lord with sacrificial offerings (v. 17). Indeed, there was an abundance of offerings made on this occasion. This included twelve goats, one for each tribe of Israel. Although Judah was the largest tribe that returned from exile, all twelve tribes were present for the dedication. God's people had returned to the land, and once again they had a temple of the Lord.

While not as glorious as Solomon's, this temple would endure for many centuries. Despite war and conflict, this second temple would last. It would be periodically remodeled and repaired. It would be extensively expanded under Herod the Great, yet it remained essentially the same temple. It lasted until it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

\$ What types of opposition do believers face today in trying to help build God's kingdom?

THE DEPTH OF GOD'S LOVE

Corrie ten Boom once said, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still." She was speaking in reference to her horrific experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. However, this statement can also be applied to the depths of sin to which humans can sink. Yet, there is no sin so egregious that the love and grace of God cannot forgive. As Paul said, "Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound" (see Rom. 5:20). The story of the Fall, Exile, and return of Israel to the Promised Land is a prime example of this truth. After centuries of rebellion, God judged Judah and sent her into exile. But that is not the end of the story. The story continued with the people's restoration, a revival of worship, and the rebuilding of the house of God.

We would all do well to learn this lesson—repentance and turning to God results in healing, forgiveness, and restoration. There is no limit to God's grace.