

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-40 Return from Exile

Isaiah predicted it. Jeremiah predicted it. Daniel, Nehemiah, and Ezra witnessed it. God promised a return from the exile in Babylon: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed” (Isa 40:3-5).

God raised up a Persian emperor, Cyrus, to send the exiles back to Judah. When Babylon fell to the Medo-Persians, Darius the Mede became the governor of Babylon. He was a friend of Daniel and appointed him to a high position. Cyrus ruled the empire, with local governors like Darius. Cyrus did not know the LORD, but the LORD used him for his purposes nevertheless. “Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of, to subdue nations before him.... ‘I will go before you and level the mountains.... I will give you the treasures of darkness, and the riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name’” (Isa 45:2-3).

Cyrus decided that captured peoples in his empire should be allowed to go back to their own countries. He published this decree: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ... The people are to provide them with gold and silver, goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem’” (Ezra 1:2-4).

Cyrus sent along with them all the gold and silver objects taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar’s officers—5,400 objects in all. About 50,000 Judean exiles returned to Judah—all those whose heart God had moved to make the journey.

When the exiles approached Jerusalem, they saw mostly ruins. The city walls were broken down. The temple was leveled. Palaces and buildings were all destroyed. Wild animals roamed freely. Babylonian armies had devastated the city 50 years earlier. On the hilltops lived a few Jews left behind by Nebuchadnezzar. They disliked the returning exiles. The Samaritans to the north claimed authority over the city. The Edomites and tribal peoples controlled the territory to the south. They resented the newcomers, too.

The exiles settled in the villages nearby. Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles, decided to go ahead with rebuilding the temple. The Samaritans offered to help rebuild, but Sheshbazzar refused their help. He and other leaders considered the Samaritans to be insincere. Little building happened until a year or so later, when another group of exiles returned. The leader’s nephew, Zerubbabel, and a young priest, Joshua, led this second group. Again, the exiles settled in nearby villages. Judean territory was small, only about 64 kilometers (40 miles) wide and 48 kilometers (30 miles) north to south.

Zerubbabel was appointed governor. Soon another group arrived, including the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They encouraged the newcomers to get busy with the temple rebuilding.

But a regional governor was upset about the rebuilding. “Who told you to do this?” he demanded. He then sent a letter to the king of Persia and complained about what the Jews were doing. The king authorized a search for Cyrus’s decree. It was found, just as the Jews had said.

The king wrote a reply to the regional governor: “Don’t interfere with the work on this temple of God. Furthermore, all their expenses should be paid out of your royal funds, so the work will not stop. You should supply animals, grain, salt, olive oil, and anything else the priests need for daily worship in the temple. May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem” (Ezra 6:6-12).

Opposition from enemies slowed down the work. Also, settling their families in the surrounding towns and finding enough food to eat took a lot of energy for the workers. Crop failure led to food shortages, which left the returned exiles weak and discouraged. Some of the old men were grumbling, “We remember what Solomon’s Temple looked like, and this temple is not much to look at” (Hag 2:3).

But God said, “Be strong, all you people of the land, and work hard, for I am with you. . . . My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear. . . . The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house. And in this place I will grant peace” (Hag 2:4-9).

Finally, after many delays the temple was completed. Priests, Levites, and all the returned exiles celebrated the dedication of God’s house joyfully. The priests offered hundreds of sacrificial animals, and 12 goats as sin offerings for the 12 tribes of Israel. One month later, they celebrated Passover—the first Passover in the temple in over 70 years. They praised God for changing the attitude of Persian kings, so they had assisted them in rebuilding the temple.

God is still calling his followers to work for him. The project may be a building of wood and cement. Or it may be gathering a group of believers and teaching them. Jesus told his followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20).

This story is **important** because God promised that a remnant of his people would return from exile in Babylon, and now he was keeping his promise.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God was still in covenant relationship with the remnant of Israel. Jews in Judah and Jews among the exiles were saying that God was finished with his people. But God was not finished with his people. The return from exile was like a new Exodus. It became the second greatest act of deliverance Israel had ever seen.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Was Cyrus aware that he was doing the will of God by sending the exiles back to their homeland? [Pause]
 - A. If you answered, “Cyrus remained a pagan, as far as we know, but God was directing his political decisions and using him to bless his people,” you answered correctly.
2. Why did the returning exiles face opposition when they arrived in Judah? [Pause]

A. If you said, "Other nations and tribes had settled down in the land, and resented the Persian decree that allowed the Jews to return and rebuild," you are right.

3. Why did it take so long to rebuild the temple? [Pause]

A. If you said, "Neighbors opposed the project, and the exiles preferred to work on their farms rather than on the temple," you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell someone else the story in your own words as you remember it. Then listen to the story again and re-tell it until you feel sure you are repeating the words and actions correctly.

We serve a God of second chances. When people repent and turn toward him, he often blesses them in unexpected ways. Prepare a message using the story of the Second Exodus of Israel. Then share it with a group of your family and friends. Invite any of those listening, who have lost hope, to repent of their sins and return to God. Like the waiting father in the story of the wayward son, God will lovingly receive them back to himself.