

Lesson 1 – Ezra 1-4

Text: 2 Chronicles 36; Ezra 1-4

Main Characters: God, Cyrus, Zerubbabel, Jeshua

Key Passages:

- Ezra 1:1 – King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.
- Ezra 3:10-13 – There were many different reactions to the temple's foundation being laid.
- Ezra 4:24 – The work on the temple was stopped by enemies of the Jews.

Main Storyline:

After 70 years in captivity (Isaiah, 44:28-45:1; Jeremiah 25:11-12), God's people were finally allowed to return to Jerusalem. In his first year, King Cyrus, the king of the Medo-Persian empire (which had defeated and taken control of the Babylonian empire), allowed God's people (now for the first time called "Jews") to go back and rebuild the temple. God had commanded Cyrus to do so, and Cyrus carried out God's commandment as He had instructed him. Cyrus even recognized that God was the source of every blessing that he enjoyed (significant contrast with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4).

King Cyrus was very helpful to the returning Jews. He commanded others in the empire to assist the Jews with money, goods, and livestock. Cyrus also restored to the Jews all of the articles of the temple which had been plundered and desecrated by Nebuchadnezzar. Cyrus made great effort to aid the returning Jews in accomplishing their mission.

Leading the people in their return to Jerusalem were two men: Zerubbabel, who was a governor/prince over the people, and Jeshua, the high priest. Note that God continued to keep His promise to David (2 Samuel 7) even through Zerubbabel (Matthew 1:12ff).

Many Jews returned to their land (over 42,000), including many Levites. Unfortunately, some of the Levites did not definitively know their ancestry, so they could not serve as priests immediately. Zerubbabel insisted that they wait until God could be consulted (through the Urim and the Thummim) to confirm whether or not the men could serve as priests.

When the Jews arrived at Jerusalem, they gathered together to offer sacrifices and celebrate feasts (well before the temple had been reconstructed). It seems that the people were afraid of the enemies around them, and immediately sought to go to God. In addition, the people supported those who were building the temple, as well as those who were bringing materials for use in that effort.

By the year after they had returned to Jerusalem, work had begun on the temple reconstruction effort. After some time, the foundation of God's temple was finally completed. All the people shouted, praising God for His goodness and mercy toward Israel. Many of the people were joyful, though there were some older people who wept when they saw the foundation of the new temple (as they had seen the splendor of the old temple compared with the relative lack of splendor in the new temple).

When the enemies of Judah heard about what they were doing in Jerusalem, they tried to stop them from rebuilding the temple. While the attempts to undermine the work began as simple discouragement, eventually their enemies wrote to the king of Persia, who forcefully stopped the reconstruction effort. The Jews did not work on the temple for about 15 years after this event.

Lessons/Applications:

- 1.) God followed through on His promises to the Jews; we can trust He will do the same for us.
- 2.) Like Cyrus, we must seek to do God's will immediately, recognizing God's position over us.
- 3.) When we have successes, we should praise God and be thankful for His help in having success.
- 4.) Sin, even though it can be forgiven, always has lasting consequences.