

# GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL EXILE and RETURN GOD THE SUSTAINER *God Brings His People Home*

Our chronological Bible study moves back a few books from Daniel to Ezra. The Bible is primarily divided by literature types rather than being put together in chronological order. In regards to the Jews' Babylonian captivity, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied even before the Jews were taken captive that they would be exiled to Babylon for 70 years AND the prophet Isaiah prophesied regarding their return even down to providing the name of the foreign king (Cyrus) who would enable their return approximately 150 years before his birth! **Isaiah 44:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> *who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"* Cyrus in his time may have thought that he was accomplishing his own plans, but actually he was doing the pleasure of the LORD. Sometimes we forget that God uses even unconverted world leaders to fulfill His plans. **Proverbs 21:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*

The fact that the very name of the man who would send God's people back to the promised land being foretold so long before the event occurred reminds us how Almighty God controls all of life's situations. Political entities come and go – God is Forever King! He is faithful to His Word! Before we read our focal passages from **Ezra**, let's take a quick look at Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the completion of the 70 years of captivity.

**Jeremiah 29:10-11 (NIV)** <sup>10</sup> *This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

I used the New International translation of this passage because that is the translation from which most of us have memorized **Jeremiah 29:11**. In our time, we often use verse 11 as personal encouragement from scripture regarding God's plans for us and we are right to do that. However, we should also know that the original prophecy referred to God's promise for the Jews' return to their homeland from the Babylonian captivity. The continued relevance of verse 11 reminds us that God is faithful to His people generation after generation and His faithfulness never fails.

The book of Ezra was written by Ezra, a scribe and priest from the tribe of Levi. God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

**Read Ezra 1:1-4 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: <sup>2</sup> “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. <sup>3</sup> Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.*

The last two verses of **2 Chronicles** are the same as the first two verses of **Ezra**, probably because **Chronicles** and **Ezra** were originally one book. **Ezra 2** records the first wave of those who returned – nearly 50,000 – a relatively small number compared to the 600,000 Israelites who came out of Egypt in the first Exodus. A second group of about 2,000 led by Ezra would follow. Not all the Jews chose to go home. They had been in Babylon 70 years and had settled down to a normal life. According to Wiersbe, the Jews developed synagogue worship during their captivity. Their life in captivity was not oppressive and Cyrus did not command them to return. It would be their personal choice. For many of the Jews, the long journey back to Judah would have been too great a challenge. God had called them back home to do the difficult job of rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple. The LORD’s work would be accomplished through willing hearts. God’s army is voluntary not conscription service!

**Read Ezra 1:5-8 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup> *Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. <sup>7</sup> Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. <sup>8</sup> Cyrus king of Persia brought these out...*

Their years in captivity had humbled them. From their experience, we learn that the same LORD who ordains the work also ordains the way! For their return, He provided willing workers, the necessary finances and the treasures taken from the original temple! In all, there were 5,400 vessels of gold and silver. Personally when I think of the length of time that had passed since these treasures had been taken to Babylon and the ungodly way the vessels were treated by Belshazzar on the night his kingdom was destroyed, it is a miracle that those treasures remained together and in good shape. Although being given possession of the temple vessels did not a temple make, the restoration of those treasures to their rightful owners undoubtedly was an encouragement to the people making the journey to Jerusalem. It was about a 1,000 mile trip. They had heard of the glory days of Solomon’s temple but undoubtedly, they knew they would find the city and the temple in ruins. Yet, these people headed for their destination with renewed hearts. God’s people gather to make worship their first priority.

**Read Ezra 3:1-7 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Then arose Jeshua...with his fellow priests, and*

*Zerubbabel... with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses...<sup>3</sup> They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings ... to the LORD, ... morning and evening.<sup>4</sup> And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings...<sup>5</sup> and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon ... the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of ... freewill offering to the LORD.<sup>6</sup> ... But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.<sup>7</sup> So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.*

The seventh month was sacred to the Jews. There are seven feasts, three of them in the seventh month. It opened with the Feast of Trumpets; the Day of Atonement was on the tenth day; and from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup>, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (aka Feast of Booths). The Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte once said that “the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings.” God gives His people opportunities for new beginnings, and we are foolish if we waste them.

The first thing Jeshua, the high priest, did was restore the altar so he could offer sacrifices for the people. Their situation was similar to the first time the Israelites came into the Promised Land when strong nations were in and around the land who resented their return. They wanted to be sure they were pleasing to the LORD. Often when we set out to do the LORD’s work, there will be those who resent us. Our focus should be doing what is pleasing to the LORD.

Zerubbabel was the head of the tribe of Judah, a descendent of David. He was a child of the Babylonian captivity. You find his name in the genealogy of Jesus! Like his ancestors, David and Solomon, Zerubbabel had a heart to build the temple. Solomon’s temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The second temple would become known as Zerubbabel’s temple. This temple would be smaller and not as grand as the first. The Ark of the Covenant would not be present because it had been lost by this time.

Jeshua, Zerubbabel and others built the altar as one of their first official acts. It symbolized God’s presence and protection. They not only returned to the land – they returned to the Law of Moses. God’s people proclaim the goodness of the LORD.

**Read Ezra 3:8-13 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel ... and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity...  
<sup>10</sup> And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests ... and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel.  
<sup>11</sup> And they sang responsively, praising and giving **thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”** And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. <sup>12</sup> But many of the priests

*and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy,<sup>13</sup> so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.*

The work on the actual temple did not begin until the second month of the next year, which means they spent nearly seven months gathering materials and preparing to build. It was in the second month that Solomon started the original temple. Jeshua and Zerubbabel were in charge of the project, assisted by the Levites and many others now known now only by the LORD.

Following the example of David, when he brought up the Ark to Jerusalem and Solomon, when he dedicated the first temple, the priests and Levites sang praise to the LORD, accompanied by trumpets and cymbals; and the people responded with a great shout that was heard afar off.

Their praise and worship service was taken directly from the Psalms. ***Psalm 136:1 (ESV)***<sup>1</sup> *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.* The temple wasn't finished yet but they were shouting and praising God because the foundation was laid. David asked in ***Psalm 11:3 (NIV)***<sup>3</sup> *When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"* The answer is to lay the foundations again! That's what spiritual revival is all about, getting back to the solid foundation of the Christian life.

The celebration began as a time of unity. The people gathered together, they stood together and they sang together. They had worked together on this precious foundation. The people united their hearts and voices in praise to the LORD for His goodness to them and then something separated them. In the midst of unity came different emotions – weeping versus shouts of joy. I am not totally sure whether the older generation was just longing for the ‘good old days’ in comparing the old to the new or grieving over past sins that had brought them to this pointing of needing to lay a new foundation. The Holy Spirit can stimulate us both to rejoice over the goodness of His grace and to grieve over the sins that require Him to correct us. When we come into the presence of Almighty God, we may feel full of joy and thanksgiving, yet at the same time be sobered by our shortcomings.

Let us learn to rejoice with those that rejoice and weep with those that weep. ***Psalm 30:5 (ESV)***<sup>5</sup> ... *Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*