

What's the Message – Lesson 80

Our lesson today looks into the beginning of the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we thank You for the opportunity to work in Your kingdom. Help us to be grateful for this, and draw us closer to You. Amen.

Many years prior to the Babylonian captivity, there was a prophecy recorded in Isaiah, chapter 44, verse 28 that stated: . . . *Cyrus 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.'* The prophet Jeremiah also spoke at length about Israel returning to its homeland, but he did not foretell the name of the man who would cause it to happen.

The book of Ezra opens with these words: *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia . . . the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus . . . so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem . . . and rebuild the house of The Lord.*

Not only did Cyrus make the decree that permitted the return of the exiles, he instructed that the vessels of the temple taken by Nebuchadnezzar be returned, and the royal treasury would provide the Israelites with animals and other materials they would need to accomplish the task. This sensitive and gentle treatment was the complete opposite of what had been experienced under the brutal armies of Assyria and Babylon, but it was consistent with the policies of Cyrus with all of the conquered nations now under his control.

It was a momentous time, comparable to the exodus of Israel from Egypt. But it would be a difficult task, one not to be taken lightly.

The distance to Jerusalem was long, with only a few sources of water along the way, and dangerous to travelers.

The challenge was much like the distance early settlers in America faced as they traveled west from St. Louis to the Pacific coast. Or, like the challenges faced by the Mayflower settlement in Massachusetts, or the Virginia colony in Jamestown. As we know from our American history, in all of these examples the people suffered challenges to feed themselves in the beginning and would not have survived if the local natives had not helped them. In the same way, it would not be easy for anyone who chose to return to what little was left of Jerusalem. As a result, many would choose to stay behind, comfortable with the life they had established in prosperous Persia.

The first group was led by the grandson of king Jehoiachin, the king of Judah that had been taken into captivity in Babylon. His name was Zerubbabel. He was a direct descendant of David, and was accompanied by Joshua, the high priest, and two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. In all, there were about 50,000 people in this first group who accepted the challenge and made the journey. In reality, it was a pitifully small group to work with for the task ahead, even though there were smaller groups in future years that arrived from Persia and were added to the new settlement. It is also likely that more than a few gave up and moved on to Egypt, so the working group in Jerusalem remained small.

We know from a reading of chapter three of Ezra that they started well, and only seven months after arriving in Jerusalem they built an altar to The Lord and began making the prescribed sacrifices. In the second year of their return they began to lay the foundation of the temple and had a great celebration when that step had been completed. It was not a unanimous celebration, however.

As we see in Ezra chapter 3, verses 10 through 13, the old men who had seen and remembered the original temple of Solomon wept because of the mediocrity of the building that had been laid out, while the younger people shouted for joy at what had just been accomplished. To add to this tension, instead of help from the local Samaritans and other neighbors, there was opposition to any rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, especially the construction of a temple there, for they feared the establishment of a thriving Jewish state.

We read in Ezra chapter four, verse five, that these opponents hired counselors to frustrate the purpose of the Israelites all the days of Cyrus, even until the reign of his successor, Darius. The combination of this opposition and the burden of establishing homes and farms providing food for their basic needs soon overwhelmed the exiles, and they slacked off building the temple.

But this “slacking” continued on for about 17 years, until the prophet Haggai encouraged them to focus on the building of the temple. And with that Teacher, here is the historical background of our study today. But other than the similarities I can see with the settlement of America, how does all this relate to us? What’s the message for us today?

Thanks, Dale. You have laid out for us a simple outline of a complex historical period. What is the situation we see of this little “nation” – who began to think of themselves as the “purified remnant”? Can we simplify it and say that they had succumbed to the political and economic pressures of the day? And in doing so, what had happened to the First Commandment? You know, the one that says to put God first in our lives? This situation leads us logically into the message of the prophet Haggai.

That message can be summed up in just a few verses from the first chapter of the short book of Haggai where we read: *Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of Hosts: consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and have harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put them into a bag with holes. . . . You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? Says the Lord of Hosts. Because of My house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house.*

*Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew,
and the earth has withheld its produce.*

The result of this strong message of encouragement was that the spirit of the leaders and people were “stirred up” and they got back to work, got their priorities straight, and completed the construction of the new temple in Jerusalem. But by the time it was done, it was about 20 years after they had first arrived. Now, how does this apply to us. Yes, we certainly have political and economic pressures in our lives, but do we have our priorities straight? Do we remember the First Commandment? Is God first in our lives?

Next time we will continue our study of the reconstruction of Judah with the preaching of Zechariah.