

I. PREPARATION FOR THE RETURN

A. Last time we saw how God was still sovereign while His people were in captivity

1. **Nebuchadnezzar did not destroy Jerusalem and the temple without the will of God**
 - a. Neb was used to punish His people Judah for their sins: especially their sins of idolatry, impenitence (refusal to heed the prophets) and Sabbath-breaking.
 - b. Neb believed that he ruled by his own power but God showed Neb that He alone rules: the dream, God's deliverance of Daniel's friends and his becoming like a beast showed him this.
2. **The other kings who came after Neb learned the same lesson: God is God alone; they all had to admit this, although they never believed in Jehovah God**
 - a. Belshazzar mocked the true God with God's holy vessels and God took the kingdom from him
 - b. Darius the Mede made himself a god for 30 days but God showed him thru Daniel that He alone is God who delivers His people who pray to Him.
3. **This was of great comfort to God's people in captivity: God is in control even of this**
 - a. Since God is in control of the Captivity *He is also in control of its end.*
 - b. The people of God knew that they deserved to be in Captivity forever.
 - c. But God in mercy told them by His prophets that it would be 70 years.

B. God's people were under the control of great world powers – Babylon, the Medes and now the Persians – and they had no way of returning to Jerusalem. The worship of God in the temple was impossible.

1. **Many of the people settled into life in Captivity; it was not like their last captivity in Egypt. In many ways it was easier.**
 - a. The people did not have the freedom to leave but they did not have to work for cruel taskmasters as in Egypt; they were not slaves *in that sense.*
 - b. The people were able to build houses for themselves, plant vineyards, make money; and many of them found life comfortable. Many of them forgot God and did not really miss Canaan.
 - c. That is always the danger for us in the world: we enjoy the world and forget God and His Church. God's true people sang a song that they would not forget (Psalm 137:5-6).
2. **Seventy years passed – many of the people who had been taken captive had died and many had been only little children at the time (you would be a grandpa!); but God kept His promise.**
 - a. Cyrus was King of Persia; this man was a wicked king but God was sovereign over him too (read Prov. 21:1); the Bible says that God stirred up the heart of Cyrus to make a decree (Ezra 1:2-4).
 - b. In his decree Cyrus declared that any Israelite who so desired could go to Jerusalem to build the temple of God, and Cyrus gave back the vessels of the Lord's house!
 - c. This was a great miracle which shows that God had not forgotten His people Israel.
3. **But not all Israel wanted to go back to Jerusalem; many had forgotten God; the journey was long and difficult; Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins.**
 - a. Only about 50,000 people returned to go to Jerusalem, and they came in three groups: the first group returned when Cyrus was king and they went under Zerubbabel the prince; the second group returned about 80 years later under Ezra the scribe (Artaxerxes was king); and finally a group came with Nehemiah 13 years later (Artaxerxes was king).
 - b. Why so few?. Most people preferred the comfort of Persia to the blessings of the worship of God; and worse, many of the captives *did not care* about the coming of Jesus Christ. He must be born in Canaan of the children of Israel.

II. SUCCESSES AND OPPOSITION (UNDER ZERUBBABEL)

A. When the people arrived in Jerusalem they got to work.

1. **What was the first thing that they did when they returned: they built the altar of burnt offering and sacrificed to the LORD**
 - a. There was yet no temple (that would take years to build) but they wanted to worship God.
 - b. They wanted to praise God for His goodness in bringing them back to Israel and they wanted to pray for God's mercy.
 - c. Led by Zerubbabel the prince and Joshua the high priest (Zerubbabel= the son of David; Joshua = the son of Levi) they started to build: Cyrus the king had given them money so they ordered wood from Lebanon and gathered stone for the building.

2. **After 2 years and 2 months the foundation of the temple was laid and this was a cause for great celebration and thanksgiving to God**
 - a. When Neb had destroyed the temple it looked as if God has abandoned His temple and would no longer dwell with His people but now the foundation of the temple was rebuilt!
 - b. The priests played trumpets and sang with loud voices to praise the goodness of God.
 - c. But in the midst of the joy there was sadness: some of the very old men who had seen the temple of Solomon wept with loud voices; so that day there was weeping and singing!
- B. But no sooner was the foundation laid than the enemies of the Jews started trouble. The enemies were the Samaritans (see Lesson 20, Q&A 9; and written work of Lesson 20).**
1. **First the Samaritans came pretending to be friends of the Jews: they said that they too wanted to help build the temple because they also worshipped Jehovah.**
 - a. But the Jews refused because the Samaritans did not worship Jehovah but idols.
 - b. Application: We do not seek the help of the ungodly to do the work of the Lord.
 2. **When the Jews refused, the Samaritans made it difficult for the Jews to build (Ezra 4:4-5).**
 - a. The Jews could not build the temple throughout the rest of the years of Cyrus.
 - b. When Cyrus died the Samaritans wrote letters to the next kings to ask them to forbid the Jews from building; they accused the Jews of being trouble makers and the Jews stopped building.
 - c. It seemed hopeless: the king wouldn't let the people build so they built their own houses instead.
 3. **Fourteen years passed and the house of God was still not finished; and God sent Haggai and Zechariah the prophets to command the people to build the temple.**
 - a. The people started to build according to God's commandment, and when the governor of the king asked them, "Who gave you permission to do this ...?" In the royal records was found the decree of Cyrus.
 - b. The search was made and Cyrus' decree was found and the king (now Darius) said that the work must continue and he gave them money to help them (Ezra 6:7-8).
 - c. He even threatened punishment on anyone who would try to stop it (Ezra 6:11-12).
 - d. Soon after this the temple was finished and the people celebrated its dedication with great joy.

III. EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

- A. 58 years later, Ezra the scribe asked permission of the King to visit Jerusalem.**
1. **The king gave permission and also gave to Ezra much gold and silver.**
 - a. Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for a bodyguard, so he and the people (about 1,500) gathered by the river to pray for a safe journey.
 - b. Ezra counted all of the gold and silver and gave it to trustworthy men for the journey. Everyone arrived safely and when the gold and silver was counted nothing was missing. The journey took over 3 months.
 2. **When Ezra arrived he found that the people had fallen into their old sins.**
 - a. Ezra read to them out of the book of the law, and the people listened and became sorry for their sins.
 - b. Ezra heard that many of the people had taken foreign wives. So grieved was Ezra that he tore his clothes, plucked the hair off his head and beard and sat down on the ground all day. Then he commanded the people to put away their foreign wives. Read Ezra 9:6.
- B. About 13 years later Nehemiah came to Jerusalem.**
1. **Nehemiah was cupbearer to the King of Persia, a very important servant in the palace.**
 - a. When Nehemiah's brother came to visit, he asked how the people of God did back in Jerusalem.
 - b. When his brother told him that the walls of Jerusalem were still not built (some 100 years after tge return!) Nehemiah prayed to God and waited for a time to ask the king.
 - c. The king gave Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem to build the city walls.
 2. **When Nehemiah arrived he inspected the walls – they were rubble and burned with fire!**
 - a. So, Nehemiah organized the people to build different sections of the wall.
 - b. But soon enemies tried to stop the work, especially Sanballat and Tobiah. First, they made fun of the work ("Why, a fox would knock over that wall!"); then, they threatened the builders.
 - c. But Nehemiah set watchmen and the builders built with sword and trowel.
 3. **With great joy, Nehemiah dedicated the walls of Jerusalem. He divided the people into two companies and the shouts of joy could be heard from a great distance away.**
 - a. Then Nehemiah returned to Persia, but he returned two years later. The people had sinned again
 - b. They had married strange wives (Neh. 13:25) and they were buying and selling on the Sabbath.