

Lesson 6

October 11, 2026

Return From Captivity:

We all need salvation from captivity to sin and its effects.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

The Book of Ezra documents the restoration of the Jewish community after its captivity. It begins with God's call for the leaders and the people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives. The focus then shifts to rebuilding the Temple, beginning with spiritual renewal through worship, sacrifices, and festivals, followed by the reconstruction of its foundation with much celebration. Despite opposition and delays, prophetic encouragement led to the resumption of the work and the Temple's completion, ending with a joyful dedication to God. We see how persistence, faith, and worship are elements in restoring a community of faith.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

About four centuries after it was built by Solomon, the Temple was destroyed in 586 BC, and the Jews were exiled. Cyrus, the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC and permitted them to return and rebuild. Led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest, reconstruction began in 538 BC but faced setbacks, including outside opposition and internal issues. Inspired by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the rebuilding was completed in 516 BC. This milestone represented both spiritual renewal and the physical revival of Jewish worship, lasting until the Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. THE JEWS RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY: Ezra 1:1-5; 2:1, 64-70.

- A. Divine Initiative for Restoration, (1:1-5)
- B. The Reestablishment of the Community, (2:1, 64-70)

2. REBUILDING THE TEMPLE: Ezra 3:1-13.

- A. Laying the Foundation of Worship, (1-6)
- B. Rebuilding the Temple's Foundation, (7-13)

3. THE TEMPLE COMPLETED: Ezra 4:1-5, 24; 5:1-2; 6:1-5, 13-17.

- A. Opposition and Delay, (4:1-5, 24)
- B. Completion and Dedication of the Temple, (5:1-2; 6:1-5, 13-17)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. THE JEWS RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY: Ezra 1:1-5; 2:1, 64-70.

A. Divine Initiative for Restoration, Ezra 1:1-5.

This passage begins with the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy as the Lord stirs the heart of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a decree allowing the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. This act reveals it was not merely a political decision, but was orchestrated by God. His ability to influence the heart of a foreign king underscores His control over nations and leaders, enabling Him to accomplish His redemptive purposes. The proclamation by Cyrus explicitly acknowledges that the restoration was commanded by "the Lord God of heaven" (v. 2), emphasizing that this initiative originated from God, not human ambition. This serves as a reminder that God's plans for restoration and renewal are always rooted in His faithfulness and His desire to bring His people back into right relationship with Him.

Furthermore, verses 5-11 reveal the Israelites' response, whose hearts were stirred by God to participate in this effort. This stirring demonstrates that divine initiative requires human cooperation; God moves, but His people must respond in obedience. The passage also reveals the communal nature of restoration, as family and tribal leaders united to take on this monumental task. It is significant that God not only initiated but also equipped His people for the work, providing resources through the generosity of others and the treasures returned from Babylon. This narrative serves as a powerful theological lesson on how God's sovereignty works in tandem with human responsibility to fulfill His purposes. It encourages believers today to trust in God's ability to restore and act faithfully when He calls them to participate in His redemptive work.

B. The Reestablishment of the Community, Ezra 2:1, 64-70.

Chapter 2 provides an important account of the restoration of the Jewish community following their return from Babylon. Verse 1 sets the stage by identifying the returning exiles as those who had been taken captive but were coming back to their homeland. Their return signified the fulfillment of God's promises and His faithfulness to His covenant. The emphasis on the collective identity of the people highlights their unity and shared purpose in rebuilding their lives and worship. This return was not merely a physical relocation but a spiritual renewal, as the people sought to reestablish themselves as a covenant community centered on God.

Verses 64-70 detail the logistical and sacrificial efforts required to rebuild the community. The total number of returnees was carefully recorded, emphasizing the importance of every individual in the collective effort. Additionally, the contributions of the leaders and families to rebuilding the Temple reveal their commitment to restoring worship as central to their identity as the people of God. The gifts of gold, silver, and priestly garments symbolize both material provision and spiritual dedication. Verse 70 describes how each group settled in their towns, signifying a return to normalcy and stability after years of being away from their homeland. These verses emphasize the crucial importance of unity, sacrifice, and faith in rebuilding a

community that honors God. This passage serves as a timeless reminder that restoration requires both divine guidance and human commitment.

The story of the return of the exiles beautifully shows God's faithfulness and power to revive and restore. Even when situations seem impossible – like freeing captives or rebuilding communities – God works through people and events to fulfill His promises. By stirring King Cyrus' heart and guiding the Israelites into action, God reveals that we are invited to join His plans. Restoration goes beyond physical repair; it also entails spiritual renewal and unity around a shared purpose. The Jews' faith, sacrifices, and unity inspire us to trust God's timing, obey His call, and remember that He equips His call, and remember that He equips and walks with us on the journey of rebuilding, whether in our own lives or in helping others.

1. REBUILDING THE TEMPLE: Ezra 3:1-13.

A. Laying the Foundation of Worship, Ezra 3:1-6.

In this passage, we see the returning exiles prioritizing the reestablishment of worship before undertaking the monumental task of rebuilding the Temple. The gathering of the people "as one man" in Jerusalem (v. 1) shows their unity and shared commitment to restoring their covenant relationship with God. Despite the threats from surrounding pockets of people and the city's state of disrepair, the first act of the people was to rebuild the altar and reinstate the sacrificial system prescribed in the Law of Moses. This act demonstrated their recognition that worship was foundational to their identity as the people of God. By offering burnt offerings "morning and evening" (v. 3), they repented and reaffirmed their commitment to and dependence on God, seeking His favor and protection as they embarked on this monumental restoration project.

Furthermore, verses 4-6 emphasizes the importance of obedience to God's commands and the rhythm of worship in their lives. The celebration of the Feast of Booths and the offering of daily sacrifices reflected their desire to honor God according to His Word, even amid challenging circumstances. We see worship is not merely a response to favorable conditions but a deliberate act of faith and devotion, especially in times of uncertainty. Before laying a single stone for the Temple, the Israelites laid the spiritual foundation by recentring their lives on God. This serves as a powerful reminder that any work for God must begin with worship and a heart aligned with His will, ensuring that our efforts are grounded in dependence on Him rather than human strength or ambition.

B. Rebuilding the Temple's Foundation, Ezra 3:7-13.

This passage begins with the people organizing resources, hiring masons and carpenters, and acquiring cedar logs from Tyre and Sidon, reminiscent of the materials used in Solomon's building of the Temple (v. 7; see 1 Chronicles 22:4-5). This reflects their commitment to honoring God with excellence and their reliance on communal effort and external partnerships for the work. The laying of the foundation marked a pivotal moment in their restoration as a nation, symbolizing a renewed relationship with God. The unity displayed by the priests, Levites, and all the people in this endeavor shows the importance of corporate worship and shared

responsibility in fulfilling God's purposes. Their actions remind us that spiritual restoration often requires intentional preparation, working together, and a focus on glorifying God through our collective efforts.

The emotional response to the foundation's completion was profound, as seen in verses 10-13. The priests and Levites led a ceremonious celebration with trumpets and cymbals, praising God for His enduring love and faithfulness. However, the scene was marked by a mix of joy and sorrow: "Many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers ... that had seen the first house, when the foundation was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice and many shouted aloud for joy" (v. 12).

Some wept because they knew this work, though needed and appreciated, would pale in comparison to the grandeur of the original Temple. However, others (perhaps those who had not seen the original Temple) shouted for joy that it was being rebuilt. This mixed reaction reminds us that God's redemptive work often involves both mourning what was lost and rejoicing in His ongoing provision. As we consider this passage, we are encouraged to trust in God's faithfulness during seasons of rebuilding and to participate wholeheartedly in His work, knowing that He can bring beauty and purpose from even the most challenging circumstances.

Ezra 3 emphasizes the returning exiles' priorities, unity, and faith. They came together to focus on worship and obedience by rebuilding the altar and offering sacrifices despite challenges. Authentic restoration starts by focusing on God, inspiring us to pursue joint efforts in fulfilling His purpose. The mixed emotions over the Temple's foundation – both joy and sorrow – remind us that redemption links loss with hope. Through the rebuilding process, we're encouraged to trust God, embrace His work, and believe in His power to transform complex tasks into beautiful testimonies of His grace. The example of the exiles urges us to prioritize worship, trust God's love, and move forward in faith.

3. THE TEMPLE COMPLETED: Ezra 4:1-5, 24; 5:1-2; 6:1-5, 13-17.

A. Opposition and Delay, Ezra 4:1-5, 24.

The Israelites faced opposition as they attempted to rebuild the Temple. "The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" approached Zerubbabel and the leaders, saying, "Let us build with you" (vv. -2), but their motives were insincere. When their offer was rejected, these opponents actively worked to discourage and intimidate the builders. They went so far as to hire counselors to frustrate the Israelites' plans during the reigns of the Persian kings (vv. 4-5). This passage illustrates how opposition can arise when we are pursuing a God-ordained task. Often, the opposition will employ subtle deceit, but at times it can also manifest as outright hostility.

A letter was sent to King Artaxerxes, claiming that Jerusalem was a "rebellious and evil city" (v. 12 NKJV). If rebuilt, the people would "not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury would be diminished" (v. 13 NKJV). The king responded, "Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, under another commandment shall be give from me" (v. 21). So, the reconstruction effort was "forcibly stopped" and "remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia" (vv. 23-24 HCSB).

B. Completion and Dedication of the Temple, Ezra 5:1-2; 6:1-5, 13-17.

In Ezra 5, the prophetic voices of Haggai and Zechariah play a pivotal role in reigniting the passion and determination of the Jewish leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua to resume the work on the Temple in Jerusalem. Despite opposition and delays, these prophets remind the people of God's sovereign plan and His faithfulness to His promises. This passage illustrates how God utilizes His messengers to inspire His people to persevere in fulfilling His purposes, demonstrating that divine encouragement can overcome human hesitation and external resistance.

Chapter 6 reveals the culmination of this divine initiative, as King Darius not only reaffirmed Cyrus's decree but also ensured its full implementation by providing resources for the Temple's completion. His order included, "And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple, which is at Jerusalem, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem" (v. 5). The king declared, "Let it be done with speed" (v. 12), "so they [the government officials] did speedily" (v. 13). So, the Jewish leaders "builded, and finished it" (v. 14). The completion of the Temple and its subsequent dedication (vv. 16-17) signified a restored relationship between God and His people, marked by worship and sacrifice. When His people act in faith and obedience He brings their efforts to fruition for His glory.

Confronted with deception, hostility, and delays, the Jewish people leaned on unwavering faith and God's perfect timing. Encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they persevered, proving that the fulfillment of God's plans cannot be stopped when His people won't quit. This story teaches the importance of trusting in God's sovereignty, maintaining steadfast faith, and exercising patience, knowing that He works behind the scenes for His glory. When we obey and rely on Him, God completes His purposes in ways that demonstrate His goodness and faithfulness.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Followers of Jesus will face opposition, but Jesus promised to be with us every step of the way. If we walk in obedience to His will and His Word, we cannot be defeated.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Before a local church launches a project or program, it must first ensure that God is leading it into the endeavor. If He is, then we know that He will lead us to success in the work.

History of the Jews: 400 BC Until Jesus' Birth

Most Christians know little to nothing about the history of the Jews in the time between the end of their Old Testament history (about 400 BC) and the birth of Jesus Christ. The last book in the Old Testament is Malachi, which is dated about 385 BC.

Following their captivity in Babylon, Jews everywhere in the Persian Empire (including Judea and Jerusalem), living under the generally benevolent rule of the Persians (537-332 BC) prospered and increased in population.

With the demise of the Persian Empire (332 BC), the Jews, like all other ethnic groups living in the empire, came under the rulership of the Greeks. Then, for 122 years (320-198 BC), the Jews in Judea were without harshness by the Greek Ptolemaic kings of Egypt.

In 198 BC, the Syrians became rulers of Judea and all of what had been the land of Israel in Old Testament times. They cruelly oppressed and persecuted the Jews, attempting to force them to abandon their God and their faith.

Beginning in 167 BC, the Maccabees, who were Jewish priest, led the Jews in a revolt and war against the Syrians. The Jews in Judea (formerly the southern kingdom of Judah) won their complete independence from the Syrians in 142 BC. For 80 years, they continued as an independent nation (until 63 BC), when they came under Roman rule, which was in effect when Jesus was born and for centuries afterward.

Near the end of the southern kingdom of Judah (586 BC), and for some time afterward, many Jews migrated to Egypt to escape the rulership of the Babylonians. The prophet Jeremiah and his assistant Baruch were taken against their will to Egypt with a large group of Jews who migrated there (see Jeremiah 43:4-7).

So many Jews migrated to Egypt and remained there, increasing in population, that when Jesus was born, more Jews were living in Egypt than in Judea. Thus, it is not surprising that Joseph took Jesus and Mary to Egypt (see Matthew 2:13-15).

WORKSHEET

Returning to Rebuild

1. How was the Lord “stirred up” your spirit recently (Ezra 1:5 AMP)?
 - If so, how have you responded?

2. What can verses 5-6 teach us about the going and giving aspect of mission service?
 - React to the following statement: “if I and a need meet, God must have had in mind my filling it.” – Jack Hyles

3. Upon the exiles’ return to Jerusalem, what did they build first, and why (3:2)?
 - How have you witnessed the truth of the following insight: “Worship changes the worshiper into the image of the One worshiped.” – Jack Hayford.