

T H E S T O R Y

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 19: The Return Home

Key Question: How can we rebuild an area of life that's been torn down?

The Return

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We have seen God's promises to Abraham miraculously fulfilled when Moses led the people to the Promised Land. We've seen highs, such as Israel's renown under David and Solomon. We've seen lows, too, through which God extended mercy. Finally, though, the split kingdoms of Israel and Judah abandoned God to the extent that they no longer could serve their purpose of making God known to all the nations, so the Lord sent them into a temporary exile.

Our last lesson ended with Daniel praying for God to fulfill his promise given through Jeremiah: bring the people back in 70 years.

1. King Cyrus decreed that the Jews could all return to their homeland (Ezra 1:1–4). (a) How did the Lord bring this about (1:1)? (b) What does this tell us about one way God works to fulfill his promises? (c) What were other people supposed to do for the Jews who wanted to return to their former land (1:4)? (d) What does this tell us about God's ability to provide the means for what he wants done? (e) Briefly describe a time God moved your heart to do something for someone else.

A century and a half earlier, God had said through the prophet Isaiah, “I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free.”²⁴⁰

2. (a) What does Ezra 1:1–4 tell us about God’s knowledge of future events? (b) What comfort can you find in God’s ability to fulfill his promises and know the future?

3. (a) Are you rebuilding any area of your life that’s been torn down?²⁴¹ If so, briefly describe. (b) If you’re not rebuilding now, briefly describe an area of your life that you rebuilt in the past.

Although Cyrus told the Jews they could return to Judah, this restoration promise wasn’t for just the tribe of Judah: it was for all Jacob’s descendants wherever they lived.²⁴² Israelites had begun moving to the southern kingdom of Judah ever since the kingdoms split.²⁴³ But when Assyria attacked Israel, a great number of Israelites fled into Judah, preserving a remnant there until Babylon came and moved most of the Jews to other places.²⁴⁴

When Cyrus conquered Babylon,²⁴⁵ he divided the empire into provinces and set governors over each. He decreed the Israelites could return to their homeland, now a Persian province called Judah.

²⁴⁰ Isaiah 45:13.

²⁴¹ For instance, are you recovering from a difficult or even devastating loss? Have you abandoned addiction? Has God torn away a false belief and are you in the midst of rebuilding on truth? Are you mending a shattered relationship? Are you building new friendships after a move?

²⁴² See 1 Chronicles 9:2–4. Some Israelites escaped Assyrian deportation or returned to their former homeland (2 Chronicles 30:1–13; 34:6–9).

²⁴³ See 2 Chronicles 11:14; 15:9.

²⁴⁴ See 2 Chronicles 30:25. Archeology shows a sizable population increase in Judah at this time (*The NIV Study Bible*, “Introduction: 1 Chronicles”).

²⁴⁵ His general Gubaru captured the city and governed it under Cyrus. “Darius the Mede” (mentioned in Daniel) is probably another name for Gubaru. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, second edition (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2008), 497.

Nearly 50,000 exiles returned to Jerusalem in about 537 BC.²⁴⁶ Babylon appointed one of them, Zerubbabel,²⁴⁷ as governor. Within seven months, the people had settled in towns, and Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua called them together to begin restoring the things of God.

4. (a) What did the people build first (Ezra 3:2)? (b) What did they fear (3:3a)? (c) Nonetheless, what did they do when the altar was finished (3:3b)?

Since Jerusalem fell, the Israelites had had no altar on which to sacrifice sin and fellowship offerings. They knew their exile was due to sin. Now they finally were able to properly show their repentance and acknowledge their need for forgiveness. After this, they could also offer fellowship offerings.

5. What part does repentance and confessing sin play when we're recovering from loss due to sin?²⁴⁸

Next the Israelites laid the foundation of the temple. That brought a great celebration, but it also brought their enemies' attention.

6. (a) What happened that hindered their work (Ezra 4:4-5)? (b) What hindrances do you face in an area you're rebuilding?

²⁴⁶ Ezra 1:11; 5:16.

²⁴⁷ Sheshbazzar (perhaps the son of the former king Jehoiachin) led the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:11, 5:16) as its first governor. Zerubbabel (perhaps Sheshbazzar's nephew) apparently became governor soon after.

²⁴⁸ See 1 John 1:9.

The Jews' enemies were able to force all temple work to stop.²⁴⁹

Haggai

Pages 266–268

In 520 BC, the prophet Haggai told Zerubbabel and Joshua it was time to finish the temple.

7. Consider Haggai's words to the people in Haggai 1:7–9. (a) What was keeping the people from their work? (b) What can we learn from this that applies to our seeking God first and giving to Christian ministries? (c) In an area of life you're rebuilding, in what ways has discouragement impeded your progress? (d) In this area, is there anything you've stopped work on that perhaps it's time to finish?

The people obeyed and set to work. Yet to those who had lived through the exile, the new temple seemed insignificant compared to Solomon's magnificent temple.

8. (a) How did God address their discouragement (Haggai 2:3–4)? (b) Although their work seemed small and insignificant, where was God and why was that important (2:4b)? (c) Is there anything in your life now that seems small and insignificant, compared to where you dreamed you'd be today? If so, how can the Lord's words through Haggai encourage you?

²⁴⁹ Work apparently halted during the reign of Cambyses, which was between the reigns of Cyrus and Darius. Ezra 4:1–23 summarizes a century of opposition. Verse 24 returns to about 520 BC and picks back up the story of rebuilding the temple; chronologically it belongs after verse 5. (See notes in *The NIV Study Bible*.)

Haggai proclaimed that this small temple would one day be filled with glory.²⁵⁰ He also spoke of a coming judgment and glory that the New Testament tells us will be fully fulfilled in the future when God's people inherit a kingdom that cannot be shaken.²⁵¹

9. What comfort is there in the promise that though our lives are often shaken here, there awaits an unshakable kingdom for God's people?

Zechariah

Pages 268–270

The prophet Zechariah joined Haggai in encouraging the people to be strong and rebuild the temple. Zechariah reassured the people that God would make them a blessing.

10. (a) How was God like a parent reassuring a child that's just been disciplined (Zechariah 8:13–17)? (b) What were the people to do? (c) How can we apply this message to our own lives?

11. (a) What would one day happen in Jerusalem (Zechariah 8:20–22)? (b) This promise encouraged the workers. What promises encourage you today?²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Many think this prophecy was fulfilled four hundred years later when Jesus entered the temple.

²⁵¹ Hebrews 12:26–28 quotes Haggai 2:6–7.

²⁵² If none leap immediately to mind, consider Romans 8:18; Roman 8:28; Philippians 1:6.

Opposition

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So the Jews set to work despite opposition. Their enemies sent a letter to King Darius informing him that the Jews claimed Cyrus had authorized their work.

12. (a) According to their enemies, what kind of progress were the Jews now making on the temple (Ezra 5:8)? (b) How was their response to Haggai and Zechariah different than many of their forefathers' responses to prophets?²⁵³

13. (a) The enemies asked for the leaders' names; did the leaders let that intimidate them into stopping the work (Ezra 5:8–10)? (b) Briefly describe a time someone tried to intimidate you into not doing what you knew was right. (c) If you're rebuilding an area of your life, what intimidations have you faced?

²⁵³ Recall lessons 15, 16, and 17.

The Temple Rebuilt

Pages 271–273

Darius found documents proving Cyrus had indeed authorized the Israelites to rebuild the temple.

14. (a) How did King Darius help the Jews (Ezra 6:6–12)? (b) How did this turn the tables on their enemies? (c) What does this teach us about God’s ability to complete what he wants done? (d) Describe a time God helped you overcome opposition to complete something you believed he called you to do.

The Jews finished building the second temple in 516 BC. The temple became known as Zerubbabel’s temple²⁵⁴ in honor of the faithful governor who oversaw its completion. There had been about 70 years between the first exiles’ departure for Babylon and the first exiles’ return. There had also been about 70 years between the first temple’s destruction and the second temple’s completion.

15. (a) What did the people of Israel do when they finished the temple (Ezra 6:16)? (b) Briefly describe a way you celebrated completing something.

16. (a) What lesson stands out to you the most about rebuilding an area of life that’s been torn down? Why? (b) How can you apply that lesson to your life?

²⁵⁴ The first temple is often called Solomon’s temple.

The restored exiles continued to rebuild their homeland and their lives. Many Jews did not return from exile, however, and God worked through them where they were, including through a Jewish girl we'll meet next week.

Timeline: The Return Home (540–470 BC)

