

Babylonian Captivity Ends

Printed Text • Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70

Devotional Reading • Amos 5:14-15

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXAMINE the rebuilding plan for the Temple in Jerusalem that God gave to King Cyrus, BELIEVE and TRUST that God provides resources for the tasks God asks us to do, and SHARE situations in which believers will trust God's provision and act in faith.

In Focus

After 27 years of ministry to the community, the leaders of the Samaritan Evangelistic Center knew it was time for them to move out of their old facility. The walls were crumbling, the foundation was shifting, and the stairs had begun cracking. Plus, Samaritan Evangelistic Center was ministering to more people than they could possibly hold in the old building, which made the facility a fire hazard.

The executive committee of the center began looking for an existing structure in the community close to their present location. But after months of searching and talking with prospective realtors, the committee couldn't find a suitable building which would meet their needs and give them greater opportunities to expand their ministry to domestic abuse survivors. So, the committee decided to buy a parcel of land right next door to their present location and build a new facility from the ground up. Said executive director Brenda Charles, "Given the circumstance, it was the most feasible and logical thing to do." The committee's accountant said, "Building projects are never easy to accomplish. Not only are there finances to be raised, but also material to buy, construction crews to hire, and deadlines to meet in order to finish the goal in a timely manner. Any wrinkle in the schedule can hinder the process."

The committee knew the most important thing to do: PRAY!

Sometimes we remember to rely on God's provision and guidance from the start. When have you forgotten to plan with God? What happened?

Keep In Mind

"And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place." (Ezra 2:68, KJV)

Words You Should Know

- A. **Stir** (Ezra 1:1) 'ur (Heb.) — To open up one's eyes; to arouse
- B. **Willingly Offered** (v. 6) nadab (Heb.) — To give freely or spontaneously

Say It Correctly

Nebuchadnezzar. Neh-buh-kad-NEZZ-zer

Belshazzar. Bell-SHAZZ-zar

Mithredath. MYTH-reh-dath

Sheshbazzar. SHESH-bazz-zar

Nethinims. NEH-thee-neems

Zerubbabel. Zeh-ROO-bah-bell

KJV

Ezra 1:1 Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

Ezra 2:64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,

65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.

66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five;

67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the Lord which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place:

69 They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

NLT

Ezra 7:1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia,[a] the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah.[b] He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom:

2 "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3 Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you!

4 Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

5 Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the Lord.

6 And all their neighbors assisted by giving them articles of silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock. They gave them many valuable gifts in addition to all the voluntary offerings.

7 King Cyrus himself brought out the articles that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his own gods.

8 Cyrus directed Mithredath, the treasurer of Persia, to count these items and present them to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles returning to Judah.[c]

11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. Sheshbazzar brought all of these along when the exiles went from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Ezra 2:64 So a total of 42,360 people returned to Judah,

65 in addition to 7,337 servants and 200 singers, both men and women.

66 They took with them 736 horses, 245 mules,

67 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys.

68 When they arrived at the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the family leaders made voluntary offerings toward the rebuilding of God's Temple on its original site,

69 and each leader gave as much as he could. The total of their gifts came to 61,000 gold coins,[a] 6,250 pounds[b] of silver, and 100 robes for the priests.

70 So the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the Temple servants, and some of the common people settled in villages near Jerusalem. The rest of the people returned to their own towns throughout Israel.

The People, Places, and Times

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon from 605 to 562 BC. King Nebuchadnezzar enters the biblical narrative when he besieges Jerusalem in 597 BC. That siege ended with Nebuchadnezzar taking many elites as captives back to Babylon, and setting up a puppet king in Jerusalem. When that king rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar and his army returned to Jerusalem and destroyed the city, taking all the inhabitants captive, and sacking the many valuables in the Temple. Besides the gold-plated fixtures used in actual worship at the Temple, the building also stored many expensive items people had given as dedications to God. King Nebuchadnezzar took all of these sacred objects as plunder and displayed them in temples in his own country, thinking this showed that his gods were more powerful than the Jewish God.

Cyrus, King of Persia from 559 to 530 BC. King Cyrus captured the city of Babylon from the Babylonian king Belshazzar. Cyrus had a policy of allowing conquered people to return to their homelands. This policy set the stage for the return of the Hebrew people to Jerusalem following their long period of captivity under the Babylonians. As a result of the Persian conquest of Babylonia, the Jews were free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus is remembered in the Old Testament as a heroic figure and messenger of God who redeemed Israel.

Discuss a time when a change in leadership allowed you to return to older, better ways.

Background

The Children of Israel had experienced a period of sheer rebellion against God. Because God is merciful, He sent His prophets to speak to them concerning their ways, but "they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chronicles 36:16). As a result the young, old, male, female, rich, and poor were led into captivity. Many died in Nebuchadnezzar's attacks, and

those who lived were taken away to Babylon “where they were servants” to Nebuchadnezzar and to Belshazzar after him (v. 20).

Ezra 1 begins with God fulfilling His promise to return His people to the land of promise after 70 years of exile. Some call this Israel’s “second exodus.”

At-A-Glance

1. The Revelation of a Stirred Heart (Ezra 1:1)
2. The Proclamation of a Stirred Heart (vv. 2-4)
3. The Response of a Stirred Heart (vv. 5-11)
4. The Gifts of Stirred Hearts (Ezra 2:64-70)

In Depth

1. The Revelation of a Stirred Heart (Ezra 1:1)

Jeremiah prophesied that God would deliver His people after a period of bondage. At the appointed time God began to move. No matter how long one may be held in captivity by the devil or by sinister human machinations, God has promised deliverance. When God wants to change a situation, the divine Spirit searches for those whose hearts are malleable to the stirring of God.

He stirred Cyrus’s spirit. We need for God to stir our spirit for the plight of others. Many of us wish to end suffering, but are we willing to put our names or personal kingdoms on the line, to stand for “the least of these”? We thank God that Cyrus did not just get stirred by the Spirit, but he followed through with an obedient spirit.

How does God stir hearts today?

2. The Proclamation of a Stirred Heart (vv. 2–4)

God wanted His people and Temple again, and He was going to use King Cyrus to put things in motion. Cyrus proclaimed (v. 2) that God had given him all the kingdoms of the earth and appointed him to build a Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus is clear that he was not speaking about just any god, but of the God who is at Jerusalem. The proclamation was also a challenge directed at the people of God. It was a time for rebuilding and refreshing. Cyrus is here calling on not just those who claim to belong to God, but those who have faith in God’s ability to protect and keep those who step out for God.

3. The Response of a Stirred Heart (vv. 5–11)

The family heads of Judah and Benjamin with the priests and Levites were preparing to “go up to build the house of the Lord” (v. 5). They needed silver, gold, goods, livestock, and freewill offerings for the house of God. This was costly, but God made a way.

All that the Babylonians stole—valuable vessels, candlesticks, incense burners, linens— were now returned. The inventory of the vessels listed (vv. 9-10) is not so much about material things as it is about the possibility of again worshiping God in a space worthy of His glory. It also signifies the power of the God of Israel over the gods and kings who laid claim to what belonged to the people of God.

4. The Gifts of Stirred Hearts (Ezra 2:64–70)

Ezra's precise history writing is on display in the exact numbers recorded here. A total of 42,360 Israelites compose the huge caravan. They require hundreds of all kinds of pack animals. Ezra is not interested in giving a detailed travel log of their journey. The destination is the only focus: Jerusalem and the Temple of God.

As soon as they arrive, the returning exiles rejoice by giving gifts toward the construction of the Temple. All gave something, not trying to one-up each other to show off how much they could give, but giving as they could.

After these gifts were given, they could settle into their ancestral lands. The Jewish nation managed to retain its identity through the exile. Therefore, they knew which lands God had appointed to which tribe. There was no need to fight and bicker over where anyone would live.

How have you celebrated the end of a long journey, or a long-anticipated journey?

Search the Scriptures

1. What did the Lord do to the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia (Ezra 1:1)?
2. What was Cyrus the king charged to do (v. 2)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why did the Temple need to be rebuilt with so much grandeur? Costly building fixtures and flourishes could have paid for many meals for the hungry or homes for the homeless. Why do we even today want to beautify our sanctuaries?
2. Why do you think God thought it was so important not to send the captives out empty-handed? What does this reveal about God?

Liberating Lesson

There are people in our society who have been cast aside because of some unfortunate event in their lives. Their possessions may even have been taken away from them as well. The individual may have placed himself or herself in a position that caused these misfortunes to occur. But when God shows mercy, we must show mercy and lend a helping hand and strengthen these individuals to stand on their own two feet again.

In this lesson, God supplied His people with a portion of gold, silver, and cattle to get them started again. How can we help someone who was once in jail and now has served that sentence?

Application for Activation

This week think of someone who needs your help. What kind of people may have lost their job, house, and possessions due to disobedience to God and His ways? They may be recovering drug addicts, alcoholics, or prisoners. They are trying their best to get back on track. How can you help right now? Ask God to guide you.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70

1:1 Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

“The first year of Cyrus king of Persia” refers to the first year that Cyrus ruled over Babylon, which would have been 538 BC. Cyrus’s reign partly began in 559 BC when he succeeded his father as king of Anshan. Cyrus defeated the king of Media and melded the empires into a dual monarchy called Medo-Persia. In 539 BC Cyrus’s army marched into the city of Babylon, bringing the Babylonian empire to a close. A few years later in 536 BC, the newly named Persian Empire would include Persia, Media, Babylonia, and Chaldea, with many smaller dependencies.

For many years the Children of Israel had been in captivity while their land laid in waste. But deep in the mind of the Israelites was the promise of God from his prophets. Before the fall of Judah, the prophet Jeremiah predicted that Judah would be taken into Babylonian captivity and the land would remain desolate for 70 years. After 70 years God would punish the Babylonians for their cruelty and sinfulness (Jeremiah 25:12). The prophet further predicted that at that time He would cause the Jews to return to Judah (29:10). The 70-year captivity began with the first of the Jews taken into captivity in 605 BC during the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1; Daniel 1:1). The period ended when the captives began their return in 538 BC, approximately 70 years later. Note Ezra’s careful wording. The message is the word of the Lord, even though it came through Jeremiah’s mouth. When the prophets spoke, they were only passing on God’s message.

In fulfillment of the word which God had spoken through Jeremiah and through Isaiah, God began to move.

Ezra tells us that “the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” to issue the proclamation. “Stirred” is from the Hebrew word ‘ur (OOR) meaning to “arouse from sleep.” “Spirit” is a translation of the Hebrew ruakh (ROO-okh). In this case the word refers to the seat of human will and intellect and emotion. By stirring Cyrus’s heart to be kind toward these exiled people, God enabled the word of His promise to Jeremiah to be fulfilled.

The LORD God of Israel caused Cyrus to figuratively wake up to the group of people in his kingdom who had borne the brunt of many prejudices and injustices. The great thing about the word “stir” is that it implies that God is saying to Cyrus: “get up from your complacency; lift up yourself and do something for me.” Cyrus follows through this stirring with an obedient spirit and a listening ear to hear “thus saith God.”

The result of God’s stirring is that Cyrus “made a proclamation” (Heb. literally, “caused to send out a voice”) throughout the kingdom. The idea here is not mere talk. The Hebrew verb form used here for “made” is causative. Cyrus puts effort into pushing out this call and making sure everyone hears or reads it. In this context the king did not just talk; he actively works to bring about God’s will. People like King Cyrus who hear the word of the Lord let it be known that God has spoken to them.

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Cyrus’ proclamation begins by establishing his own power and naming the power that backs him. Saying God gave him “all the kingdoms of the earth” is hyperbole (accepted exaggeration), but it was literally true that the Persian Empire was the greatest ruling power in the Western world at that time. “God” in this case is a translation of the Hebrew el (ELL), which in the ancient Near East was the most widespread word for God. But Cyrus makes certain to specify which God he means: this God is in heaven, and wants a house in Jerusalem in Judah. “Heaven” from the Hebrew shamayim (shah-MY-eem) refers to the abode of God, a higher realm where celestial beings dwell. This God is the “LORD,” a common stand-in instead of translating the true name of God written in the Hebrew: Yahweh.

Cyrus recognizes that his task to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem is something God “hath charged” (Heb. paqad, paw-KOD) him with. The word means that God has placed it in his care to see to its completion. Even though Cyrus worked this great task in full acknowledgment of God, the Bible student ought not to think Cyrus had converted to worshiping only Yahweh. Although Cyrus acknowledged the Lord, Scripture clearly states that he was an unbeliever (Isaiah 45:4). In the current verse, as well as the next, Cyrus is clear he was not speaking about just a god, but of the God who is at Jerusalem. Since Cyrus understands that the Jewish Yahweh is over in Jerusalem, he sees no reason to exclusively worship Him from all the way over in Babylon.

3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. 4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

The question “who” is not about identity. This “who” is meant to draw out the willing. Who is he among you who is willing? Why will the people not be willing? Just because people are God’s people does not always mean that they will go when God calls.

The purpose of Cyrus’s proclamation was to grant full permission to Jewish exiles to return to their own country if they so chose. No prominent person and certainly no large people-group under a monarch was allow to pick up stakes whenever they wished. Cyrus needed to grant them permission to move to another part of his territory. Also, this charge recommended to those of their countrymen who chose to remain to aid the returnees on their way by contributing liberally toward the rebuilding of the Temple. Whether they are able to give money, goods, or livestock, any gift from those staying behind is accepted.

Today still, ambitious building projects require large budgets, and it is difficult for many to afford them. This is especially true of people who have experienced times when they did not know how their own bills would be paid. Our God works miracles, though, and makes a way. Just as today projects are completed with public funds, private funds, and a combination of both, so the Temple in Jerusalem was to be funded by Cyrus' public contributions and the private contributions of those who were unable or unwilling to make the trek themselves.

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

The tribes of Judah and Benjamin are mentioned here because they were the most numerous of those that went into Babylonian exile. When the nation of Israel split after Solomon died, the only tribes that remained with the Southern Kingdom were Judah and Benjamin, which is why that nation was called Judah. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, with the majority of the other 10 tribes had been conquered and disbursed earlier by the Assyrians.

"The chief of the fathers" is a reference to the paternal and ecclesiastical leaders during the captivity. By Cyrus's day, these leaders were primarily elders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but members of the other 10 tribes who retained the pure worship of God were also represented (1 Chronicles 9:3). These elders naturally took the lead in this movement. They were followed by all those Jews whose love for God and patriotism were strong enough to leave the comforts of a foreign land for the hardships of the repatriation.

Many of the Jews who had been born in Babylonia or had comfortably established themselves decided to stay behind. Although they would remain behind, they generously contributed to the venture. It also appears that some of their international friends and neighbors displayed hearty goodwill and great liberality in aiding and promoting the views of the emigrants. The phrase "willingly offered" is a translation of the Hebrew *nadab* (naw-DOV) which means "to give freely." The word denotes the inward attitude of those who spontaneously gave to the construction of the Temple.

What a glorious time this must have been! A form of jubilee. God had a remnant of people to fulfill the next phase of Israel's spiritual journey. The leaders were preparing to go forth in the power and might of God's promise to His people. They were strengthened to do the work of the Lord. Generations had been in bondage and now there was release!

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

Nebuchadnezzar had looted the Temple of God and taken the vessels of the house of the Lord as prizes and proof of the power of the Babylonian gods. Some of the vessels had been taken in 605 BC (Daniel 1:2), others in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:13), and the rest in final deportation in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:13-15). These items were placed in the temples of the Babylonian gods.

God wanted His people and Temple again, and He was going to use King Cyrus to put things in motion. No matter how long it takes, God can bring His people back to the place of true worship and restore all that has been lost. In this sense Cyrus is a type (or picture) of the Messiah who seeks by Word and work to restore humanity to the place of true worship and celebration. Cyrus is even called God's "anointed" (Heb. *mashiakh*, maw-SHE-okh), which is what "messiah" means (Isaiah 45:1). The

term “anointed” is used for various people in the Old Testament. They were all God’s agents, working out His plan of salvation. They all prefigured the true Messiah, who could provide true and lasting salvation.

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

Many believe that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two different people, but it is more likely that they were the same person. The name Sheshbazzar is Babylonian in origin, but Zerubbabel is Hebrew. The Babylonian name indicates that Sheshbazzar may have served in the royal court where Babylonian names were given to young men chosen to serve to make them more Babylonian. The most famous case of Babylonian renaming is that of Daniel’s friends (Daniel 1:7; also see Esther 2:7). The element that ties the names together is the office of Judah’s governor. Ezra records that Sheshbazzar was governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14), while Haggai records the name Zerubbabel as the governor at the same time (Haggai 1:1). It is likely that Ezra simply used both names. “Numbered” is from the Hebrew safar (sah-FAHR) meaning to enumerate or count, usually through a written record. These expensive gold and silver vessels were inventoried and a written record was given.

Verses 9 and 10 list specific objects that were part of this written record. This itemized list only tallies to 2,499, but is totaled to 5,400 in verse 11. It is probable that the larger, most valuable vessels are mentioned, while the inventory of the whole, including great and small, came to the gross sum stated in the text. As Sheshbazzar, a Babylonian official, this man has little to do in Ezra’s account. However, as Zerubbabel, the Jewish prince, he is well remembered. Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel who was the son of Jeconiah and an ancestor of Christ (Matthew 1:12). Because of his royal bloodline, he was recognized among the exiles as a hereditary “prince of Judah.” He led the exiles in their return to Judah from their Babylonian captivity (Ezra 2:1–64). In the ruined city of Jerusalem, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the high priest, led the people in the restoration of the Temple (3:1–9).

2:64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, 65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.

66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five;

67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

Not all the Jewish exiles embraced the privilege which the Persian king granted them. The great proportion of Jews, born in Babylon, preferred continuing in their comfortable homes instead of undertaking a long, expensive, and hazardous journey to a desolate land. Mordecai and Esther are examples of these. Nor did the returning exiles all go at once. This first band of 42,360 went with Zerubbabel, others afterwards with Ezra (7:1–10:44), and a large number with Nehemiah at a still later period (Nehemiah 1:1–2:20). Note that the 42,360 number is only those of the official Jewish congregation; when their entourage is added, the caravan number swells to almost 50,000.

The 8,136 animals mentioned in verses 66-67 obviously are not enough to carry the 42,360 citizens of the expedition. These animals were likely used for carrying the people’s many belongings and all the treasure that Cyrus was returning to the Temple. The people would have walked or ridden in carts.

68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place:

69 They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

Ezra records that once the group finally arrived in Jerusalem, they immediately gave offerings to God. What a celebration it must have been for this formerly oppressed people to be free to rebuild their culture. The very first step, they knew, had to be the Temple. Many gave freely to the project, perhaps depositing the gifts that were given to them by those who could not make the journey (vv. 4, 6).

A dram is an ancient unit of currency, one of the oldest we have in the archaeological record. Though a single dram is not a significant sum, 1,060 of them would be worth close to \$5,300 today. While the cost of silver currently (2020) is over \$200 per pound, one could assume the silver mentioned here was in a form of currency rather than pure silver. Still, it is a princely sum by itself. Textiles were a valuable commodity in pre-industrial societies as well. Priestly garments were even more highly prized, as they included many pieces of fine linen and richly dyed and embroidered fabric (Exodus 39).

70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Now that the people have arrived and taken their first steps toward building the Temple, they can settle in to building back up their nation. They return to their ancestral lands, which God appointed for each tribe in the Promised Land. The Levites, who were charged with populating the priesthood for the nation, were a special case, though. Unlike the other tribes, the Levites were not granted a specific territory in the Promised Land. Rather, the other tribes were to give the Levites several towns in their territories (Numbers 35:2-8). These are "their cities" (v. 70) in which the Levites and all the worship leaders dwell as the other Israelites return to their own cities.

There was much rebuilding still to do. But the returning Jews were willing to accept all these life-altering challenges when they were convinced that God wanted them to do so. They trusted that, while difficult times had come, such times were temporary. The prophets had told them the exile would only be 70 years, and that afterward, they would return and rebuild. May we too trust God's promises as we venture out to fulfill His will.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Prepare the Way of the Lord
(Isaiah 40:1-11)

TUESDAY

Being God's Instrument
(Isaiah 45:1-10)

WEDNESDAY

God Will Provide for Every Need
(Philippians 4:10-19)

THURSDAY

Lift Up Your Eyes to God
(Isaiah 40:12-15, 21-31)

FRIDAY

Live Freely but Responsibly
(1 Peter 2:13-17)

SATURDAY

Light Dawns for the Righteous
(Psalm 97)

SUNDAY

Cyrus Permits Jews to Return Home
(Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70)