

Babylonian Captivity Ends

Tony double checked his watch. It was 8:55 A.M., and Jasmine was dressed with makeup and hair complete! The couple had agreed to leave the house at 9 A.M. sharp in order to get to church by 9:20-9:30 A.M. This would ensure that they would not be seated in the overflow rooms for the 10 A.M. service.

The Hills were grateful that their church was growing! Tony and Sharon prayed and fasted along with Green Pastures Community Church for souls to be saved. They were also part of several outreach ministries at the church. It was an exciting time at Green Pastures, and the Hills wanted a front-row seat.

As Tony entered the sanctuary, he paused at one of the collection boxes in the rear of the sanctuary. Jasmine had been stopped by one of her girlfriends. A few minutes later, he saw Jasmine enter the middle doors to the sanctuary. It reminded him of all the other times she had come through that door, and the good things God had done for them over the years. He had brought them through some hard times, and they were humbly grateful.

Now, Tony and Jasmine were grateful they were able to give their largest offering in recent years. They had made a special sacrifice for the new wing the church was building. Jasmine slipped her arm through her husband's as the two of them bowed their heads and prayed silently. Then Tony dropped the envelope into the open slot.

1. *How has God deepened your trust in Him through your past experiences?*

2. *What were some of the things from which He delivered you during those experiences?*

3. *Why are such memories of His provisions sacred to your Christian faith?*

Cyrus Makes a Proclamation

Ezra 1:1-4, KJV

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.

Ezra 1:1-4, NIV

¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

²"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ⁴And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with free-will offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "

As soon as Cyrus conquered Babylon, "the LORD moved [his] heart" (vs. 1) to make a proclamation concerning Israel.

This happened “in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah” (vs. 1). Cyrus’s proclamation explicitly acknowledged the role of “the LORD, the God of heaven” in giving him “all the kingdoms of the earth” (vs. 2). God had “appointed” him to rebuild the temple. Not only were all Israelites freed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, but Cyrus also gave them silver and gold, goods, livestock, and freewill offerings. God used Cyrus to liberate His people and to provide everything they would need—even the offerings to use to worship Him.

4. *What did Cyrus do after conquering Babylon?*
5. *How did Cyrus begin his proclamation?*
6. *What things did Cyrus commission in his proclamation?*

The People Respond

Ezra 1:5-8, 11, KJV

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

Ezra 1:5-8, 11, NIV

⁵Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.

⁷Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed

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.

in the temple of his god.

⁸Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. . . .

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

With the proclamation, mostly the families from Judah and the priests and Levites made the trip back. In addition to the gold, silver, and provisions, they were given the articles the Babylonians had stolen. God wanted the temple not only to be rebuilt but restored. Cyrus's treasurer, Mithredath, "counted" the items to Sheshbazzar (vs. 8), who may have been an associate of Zerubbabel, the governor (Ezra 3:8-13), or it was another name for Zerubbabel himself (5:16).

7. *Who chose to return to Jerusalem? Why?*

8. *What special items were given to those who returned?*

The Counting of the Returned Exiles

Ezra 2:64-70, KJV

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

Ezra 2:64-70, NIV

⁶⁴The whole company numbered 42,360,

⁶⁵besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they also had 200 male and female singers. ⁶⁶They had 736 horses, 245 mules, ⁶⁷435

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.

camels and 6,720 donkeys.

⁶⁸When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site.

⁶⁹According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments.

⁷⁰The priests, the Levites, the musicians, the gatekeepers and the temple servants settled in their own towns, along with some of the other people, and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.

About 42,000 people returned, a fraction of those who had been exiles; most exiles remained in Babylon. The heads of families who had the ability and desire gave freely, so that the work on the temple could begin. The original exiles had left with nothing, but they did not return empty-handed. The value of a gold daric would be roughly five dollars today; a mina of silver weighed about 13 ounces. The temple rebuilding had been amply provided for, and people resettled in their ancestral towns.

9. *What was different about those who returned?*

10. *What did some of the heads of the families give? Why?*

11. *What did the people do after they had arrived?*

The Utter Richness of Being a Child of God

When we look back at the darkness from which we came, and look at the Light leading us into the future, we can't help but feel wondrous joy. We are blessed to the utmost by our loving, amazing God.

Spiritual darkness encompasses all our fears, anxieties, and sins. Its grip is like an iron vise, strangling our souls and rotting our spirits. Some of us are quite aware of what is happening to us, but others are oblivious to our spiritual degeneracy. And yet, God's light not only illuminates the clinging claws of spiritual darkness, but it also grasps us and yanks us toward the Lord Himself, delivering each one of us from our own personal wretchedness.

Like a lamp in a dark cave, we can see both where we are and where we need to go to escape from worldliness. Meanwhile, God provides us with the spiritual tools we need to go forth, tools such as wisdom, courage, and strength. Moreover, whenever we stumble, the Lord is always present to lift us when we reach out to Him, trusting that His love for us will never fail.

And how can we be assured that what is said here is true? For those who have walked with God, their recollections bear witness to this truth. But we have an even more powerful testimony than our memories, and that is God's Word, which provides clear evidence of God's truth.

Therefore, like the psalmist, let us sing out: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105, KJV).

12. *Briefly describe the spiritual darkness when you feel apart from God.*

13. *How have you felt God's divine light when you feel close to Christ?*

14. *How does God's holy Word shed light on your walk with the Lord?*

Trust in the Lord

Finally, their heavenly Father answered the prayers of the exiled Jews when King Cyrus granted their desire to return to their homeland. Moreover, Cyrus decreed that they could rebuild their temple and that he would aid them in this sacred task. Just as the Lord God delivered the exiled Jews and provided for their needs, God rescues us and supplies us with spiritual blessings.

► *Will you place your trust in God in whatever situation you encounter in this coming week? If so, write that commitment in a sentence here or on an index card to take with you. By next week, be ready to talk about an incident or incidents in which circumstances demanded that you turn to the Lord for help, and describe what He provided for you.*

KEY VERSE

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

When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. —Ezra 2:68, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of March 7 through March 13

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Ezra 3:8-13—Rebuilding the Temple and Praising God.
- Tue.** Ezra 4:1-5—Jews Discouraged from Rebuilding.
- Wed.** Revelation 5—Worship at the Heavenly Throne.
- Thu.** Psalm 138—Bowing in Praise.
- Fri.** Haggai 1—The Time to Rebuild Has Come.
- Sat.** Haggai 2:1-9, 15-19—The Temple's Foundation Laid.
- Sun.** Ezra 6:1-12—God Provides through King Darius.