

# TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD

## “Jerusalem Will Be Raised Up”

by James Jackson

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One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Lion King*, the original 1994 animated version, not the updated, CGI remake. Simba was the promised heir to his father's kingdom. But thanks to the evil machinations of his uncle, Scar, he was driven into exile, overwhelmed with guilt after his father's death. There, he is befriended by Timon and Pumba, a meerkat and warthog who convince him that the wilderness is actually a paradise, a place with no worries, because there are no responsibilities.

But deep down inside, Simba longs for his home. He knows he doesn't belong in exile, and when he learns that things have gone downhill in his homeland, he vows to return to face his uncle and reclaim the kingdom that is rightfully his. Timon and Pumba reluctantly accompany him back to Pride Rock, and as they survey the devastated landscape that had once been so full of life, Timon scratches his head and says, “You're gonna fight your uncle for this? Boy, talk about your fixer-upper.”

In many ways, the story of *The Lion King* resembles the story of God's people in the Old Testament. God intended Israel to be set apart for His glory, a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6). But after centuries of rebellion against God, He allowed His people to be exiled to Babylon. For

seventy years, they lived in captivity; first under the Babylonians and then under the Medo-Persian Empire. Finally, Cyrus the Great issued a decree allowing the exiles to return to their homeland.

Just as Simba, Timon, and Pumba had a lot of work to do to restore Pride Rock to its former glory, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah had a lot of work to do to restore Jerusalem. After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in 586 BC, Jerusalem was in sorry shape. The land was overgrown, the walls of the city were broken down, and the temple was in ruins. Moreover, after seventy years without a temple, the Levitical priesthood was all but obsolete.

And so, each of these men set out to restore one aspect of the “fixer-upper” Jerusalem had become. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple, Ezra reestablished the priesthood, and Nehemiah repaired the walls. Their stories are told in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, while the prophetic books of Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah record the Lord's words that motivated the work.

### A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

God had a very practical approach to restoring Jerusalem. The emphasis for the first wave of exiles was to

reinstitute sacrifices and burnt offerings. The people needed to re-learn how to worship God properly. So before any work was done on the temple, a head count revealed how many of the returning exiles were of the Levitical priesthood (Ezra 2). Then the returnees rebuilt the altar and restored the observance of the Feast of Booths (Ezra 3:1-7).

Only then did Zerubbabel begin his work on rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3-6). The work did not come easily. They were opposed by enemies and for several years did no work at all. But finally, after years of stops and starts, the temple was completed.

Notice that God prioritized worship over building a physical landmark. The altar was rebuilt and the Feast of Booths was observed before a single stone was laid on top of another in the temple. Have you ever noticed how often we get that backwards in our modern church building campaigns? We tend to think, “We just need a bigger sanctuary, and then we’ll really be able to worship God.” But that’s not the pattern we see in Ezra.

### THE TEMPLE WASN'T THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Zechariah’s prophetic ministry took place at roughly the same time as the events of Ezra 1-6. Zechariah 1:1 says that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, about four years before the temple was dedicated, according to Ezra 6:15. However, much of Zechariah’s prophecy concerns events that would take place far in the future. Zechariah prophesied that one day the Lord would open a fountain in Jerusalem that would cleanse her inhabitants from sin and uncleanness (Zech. 13:1). This imagery points to the blood and water that flowed from Jesus’s side when He was pierced by the Roman soldier (John 19:34). This reminds me of that beautiful old hymn:

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins; And  
sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.<sup>1</sup>

Zechariah’s prophecy was fulfilled outside the temple! Indeed, the temple was being shaken by a violent earthquake at the moment Jesus died (Matt. 27:51-54).

Believers today are  
God’s temple, and  
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God then gave Zechariah a glimpse even further into the future, long after the second temple was destroyed in AD 70. Through Zechariah, God revealed that there will come a day when the Lord will ultimately triumph over all His enemies (Zech. 14). This prophecy will be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

This unit of study covers a dizzying span of centuries, from the return of the first exiles five hundred years before Jesus to the death and resurrection of Jesus to the eventual return of Jesus. We see God revealed in practical planning (Zerubbabel) as well as apocalyptic prophecy (Zechariah). But through it all, we also see that God is truthful. He is a God who keeps His promises, even working through pagan kings to bring His people home from exile. He is a God who can be trusted to fulfill every one of the promises He made through His prophets Jeremiah and Zechariah.

God does not need an earthly temple in order to receive our worship or reveal His plan. Believers today are His temple, and He reveals Himself to us when we make worshiping Him our priority. And God desires to do a restoration project in the lives of His children today!

1. William Cowper, “There Is a Fountain,” in Baptist Hymnal (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Worship, 2008), 224.



# A PEOPLE RETURNED

## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord moved a leader to fulfill His word (Ezra 1:1-4).
2. The Lord roused the people to rebuild His house (Ezra 1:5-11).
3. The Lord restored the families to their homes (Ezra 2:1-2).

Background Passage: Ezra 1–2

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God is faithful to fulfill His promises and will bring restoration.

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God kept His promise to return His people from exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve's first sin, all humans have been exiled from God and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship God.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been freed from sin and have experienced God's kindness, we make worship our first priority so that others will see the goodness of the Lord.

# GROUP TIME

NOTES



## INTRODUCTION

**SETTING:** After spending seventy years in exile, away from their homeland, the Lord brought upheaval to kingdoms of the world, resulting in His people going home. Belshazzar and the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians, and the result was a change in policy toward those who had been deported from Judah. God would bring His chosen people back to the land of promise—the land that He had given to Abraham and that Israel had settled during the days of Joshua.

**INSTRUCT:** Have group members recall occasions when they or family members were away for extended periods of time and then came back home again, or maybe a time when they went back to their childhood home after being away for months or years. Have them describe what it was like to come home by engaging their senses with the following questions.

**DISCUSS:** **What sounds did you notice when you returned home? What smells were different? What things did you see that you hadn't noticed before?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

**TRANSITION:** God's people had been away from their homeland in exile for decades. During the Babylonian siege of 586 BC, the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. So when the people returned to the land of promise, the sights, smells, and sounds would have been jarring for them—the walls were broken, the temple burned, and the fields barren. It would take great motivation to return back to their homeland and rebuild what had been ruined.



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# POINT 1

## THE LORD MOVED A LEADER TO FULFILL HIS WORD (EZRA 1:1-4).

**1** 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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: **2** “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. **3** Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. **4** And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 1:1-4** from his or her Bible.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Through Cyrus, God stayed true to His **covenants**, fulfilling His word in bringing the **people** of Israel back to their land.

**DISCUSS:** How should knowing the Lord fulfills His promises cause us to read His Word? (with eyes of faith, looking for how the Lord is bringing His promises to fulfillment; digging into the Scriptures and looking at various references to see how God keeps His promises in various ways; expectant to discover how the Lord is working.)

**EXPLAIN:** Use the **VERSES 2-4** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Throughout **history**, including Cyrus's actions, God is sovereign over all, bringing about His **purposes** and **promises**.

**DISCUSS:** What difference should God's providence, His control of all things, make in how we view history? (history is not out of control but ordered and designed by God to bring about His good purposes for His glory and His people's good; we can trust the present and the future to a God who knows all and orchestrates the events of history; we should not fear the present nor future circumstances but entrust ourselves to the Lord)

**TRANSITION:** Just as the Lord could move the heart of an unbelieving leader, the Lord could rouse the hearts of His people so that they would be restored to worship Him rightly.

### NOTES

### THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

The son of a priest from Anathoth, Jeremiah served as a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah from the reign of Josiah through the reign of Zedekiah, Judah's last king. He warned the Israelites of their idolatry and disregard of the Lord, but instead of repenting, they continued in sin, leading to their captivity. Yet Jeremiah also preached hope because God promised they would return to the land (Jer. 29:11; 30:8; 31:4; 33:6-9). He even bought land in Jerusalem to illustrate that promise (Jer. 32:6-25).

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is ‘The Governor among the nations’ (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best.”<sup>1</sup>

—A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

## COMMENTARY

**VERSE 1 /** The book of Ezra looks back to God’s covenantal promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. God led Abraham to a new land where He would make this family into a great nation. Abraham believed God’s promises (Gen. 12:4; 15:6) and settled in the promised land, but his descendants were later driven into Egypt by a famine. They spent the next four hundred years in bondage until God delivered them through Moses. God had promised to make these descendants His own “possession” out of all the peoples and His “holy nation” if they obeyed His voice and kept the covenant He had given at Mount Sinai—encapsulated in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19:5-6; 20).

But throughout the history of Abraham’s family, this nation did not obey the Lord’s voice. Judges and prophets would arise and call the people back to the Lord. But after centuries of disobedience and covenant-breaking, their enemies captured them and they became exiles, where they longed for the day when God would rebuild Jerusalem. This exile fulfilled the covenantal curses that Moses had laid out before the people in Leviticus 26:32-34 should they choose to abandon the Lord and His covenant.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the people knew one day a “Cyrus” would arise as a great political leader. He would disarm kings and be the Lord’s “anointed” and the Lord’s “shepherd” who would fulfill all of the Lord’s pleasure, resulting in Jerusalem’s rebuilding and the temple’s foundation being laid (Isa. 44:28–45:1). This action of the Lord, that He **“stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia,”** is where the book of Ezra begins.

The reference to **“the first year”** probably refers to the first year Cyrus had authority over Babylon and Judah in 539 BC as the king of Persia. His willingness to free exiles to return to the land is linked to the prophecy of Jeremiah. During his day, Jeremiah spoke of a time when Jerusalem would be rebuilt (Jer. 31:38) and when the people would return from captivity after seventy

years of exile (Jer. 25:11,12; 29:10). Ezra 1:1 and 2 Chronicles 36:22 help pinpoint the beginning of the seventy years from the first deportation of Jews, including Daniel (Dan. 1:2-4), from the land in 605 BC.

**VERSES 2-4 /** In a written letter to his kingdom, Cyrus proclaimed that the Lord, the God of the heavens had appointed him to build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem. Cyrus was known to have a pragmatic political approach to conquered lands. He sought peace in his kingdom by returning religious items stolen by the Babylonians to their original peoples; he rebuilt temples for the religious items; and he resettled people back into their own homelands.<sup>2</sup> Yet from the perspective of our passage, this was no mere act of pragmatism but a work of the hand of the Lord. Five times Cyrus’s decree mentioned God.

Cyrus called Him **“the LORD, the God of heaven.”** While this does not indicate anything of Cyrus’s beliefs about the Lord, within the context of Ezra, it must be understood as an expression of God’s sovereign hand over all things, even over Cyrus, who had **“all the kingdoms of the earth.”**

Cyrus, in order to accomplish building the house of the Lord, permitted any of those who were the Lord’s people to return to Jerusalem. With this task, Cyrus expressed the desire that God’s presence would go with His people. For a Jewish reader, these words would have reminded them of the Lord’s promises to go with His people during the exodus, wilderness wanderings, and entrance into the land of promise (Ex. 34:9; Num. 14:14; Deut. 31:6). As the Lord was with them in the past, He continued to be with them now.

Finally, Cyrus decreed that every survivor’s neighbors in the land should support this work of reconstruction of the temple by giving of their resources (cf. Ezra 1:6). Just as God had brought Israel out of Egypt, He once again was bringing His people out of exile and back home.

# POINT 2

## THE LORD ROUSED THE PEOPLE TO REBUILD HIS HOUSE (EZRA 1:5-11).

NOTES

**5** Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. **6** And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. **7** Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

**8** Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. **9** And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, **10** 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; **11** all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 1:5-11** from his or her Bible.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the **VERSES 5-6** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

As God is in **control** of all things, He stirred the hearts of His people to long for the **promised** land, just as He does for us today.

**EXPLAIN:** Use **PACK ITEM 2: THE RETURN MAP** and the **VERSES 7-11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

The Lord roused the hearts of leaders and His people so that proper **worship** of Him could be **restored** and sustained.

**DISCUSS:** How should God's care for the details of His worship move our hearts to worship Him better? (make sure our worship is in spirit and truth; make sure our worship is true and pleasing; make sure our worship is according to His Word and His ways)

**TRANSITION:** Since the Lord can rouse the hearts of leaders and people to do what is pleasing to Him, He can be trusted to redeem and restore His people.



## COMMENTARY

**VERSES 5-6** / While Cyrus had permitted any of God’s people to return to Jerusalem to build the house of the Lord (1:3), it was the Lord who roused and stirred the spirits of the people to go. What would cause the people to take up the opportunity to return to Jerusalem after it had been destroyed? Their receptivity could only be fueled by the promises of God to restore Israel. The spiritual encouragement to go suggests that the journey and task ahead would be challenging. Jerusalem and the temple would have to be rebuilt from scratch after the Babylonian siege and destruction (see 2 Chron. 36:15-21).

Included among the returnees were key leaders from the Southern Kingdom of Judah—the family heads from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These people had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar back to Babylon. Along with these family heads were the priests and the Levites. These were the religious leaders of Israel and necessary for proper worship within the temple.

Just as the first exodus led God’s people out of bondage and slavery so that they might build a dwelling place for God, so the people came out of exile in Babylon and returned to the land in order to rebuild the temple. And just as the people experienced gifts from their neighbors at the first exodus (Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36), so these returning exiles experienced the favor of their neighbors, receiving gold, silver, goods, valuables, and livestock for the journey and the work. These items were given to assist in the reconstruction of the temple. These connections with the first exodus suggest that Ezra 1 should be viewed as a second exodus, one that Isaiah was looking forward to (cf. Isa. 43:19-21; 48:21; 51:9-11; 52:11-12).<sup>3</sup> While Isaiah foretold of an exodus to come, this exodus from Babylon did not meet all of the expectations that Isaiah had seen coming. There would be yet another and greater exodus to come—one that would lead people out of sin and death and into eternal life.

**VERSES 7-11** / In verse 7, there is a stark contrast between Cyrus’s actions and Nebuchadnezzar’s. The king of Babylon “**had carried away**” the vessels from the Lord’s house; now the king of Persia “**brought out**” the articles from the temple to give them back to the returning exiles. Babylonians took the idols of defeated peoples and placed them in their temple, attempting to show how the gods of the nations were subservient to the gods of the Babylonians. Since Israel had no idols, temple artifacts and furniture were taken instead.<sup>4</sup> But the Lord roused the spirit of Cyrus, causing the articles of the house of the Lord to be brought back. Verse 8 names Mithredath as the treasurer who returned the items from Cyrus to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. In Ezra 5:14, Sheshbazzar is called the governor of Judah, appointed by Cyrus.

What was returned for the temple is listed in verses 9-10. While the number of items listed in these verses totals 2,499, verse 11 says that the total number of items returned was 5,400. We may assume that the list in verses 9-10 was not exhaustive. There is also some uncertainty as to what the “29 silver knives” refers to. This obscure Persian word should not cause us confusion. Regardless of the nature of the items listed, verse 8 makes it clear that the exact items confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar were counted out and returned to Sheshbazzar. These articles were then taken back to Jerusalem by the returning exiles in preparation for the rebuilding of the house of the Lord.

These articles held deep significance for the exiles from Judah, reminding them of the Lord’s presence and dwelling place among them. But these weren’t idols for worship. The Lord directed the return of these items. The Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus, and the Lord stirred the hearts of His people. While nations may rise up and plot against the Lord and His people, His sovereign hand will rule history, and He will remain faithful to His covenant promises made so long ago.

# POINT 3

## THE LORD RESTORED THE FAMILIES TO THEIR HOMES (EZRA 2:1-2).

NOTES

**1** Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. **2** They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

**READ:** On account of some difficult names, read aloud **Ezra 2:1-2** yourself for this point.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight that God keeps His promises and will continue to do so because He is unchanging (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

**ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #11: God Is Unchanging:** God's being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's unchanging **nature** is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find **assurance** and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into **eternity**.

**DISCUSS:** How might God's unchanging nature encourage you during hard times? (because His love never changes, we can know He loves us no matter what; because His grace never changes, we know He will always forgive when we repent; because His goodness never changes, we can trust in His plans for us; because He always keeps His promises, we can know that what He says is true)

**EXPLAIN:** Use the **VERSE 2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God returned His people back to the land as part of His promise to **deliver** them and give them a king and priest through the line of David, which is ultimately fulfilled in **Jesus**.

**TRANSITION:** Just as He kept His promise to His people never to leave them nor forsake them, we have confidence that the Lord will keep us and bring us home. We know that Christ has gone away to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-4), and His death and resurrection have secured the future for those who have put their faith in Him. This means that we can trust the Lord in our present circumstances and believe that He will lead us all the way home.

### NEHEMIAH AND MORDECAI

The "Nehemiah" mentioned in Ezra 2:2 is not the same Nehemiah who would later rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. And "Mordecai" is a different figure than the one mentioned in the book of Esther. As in our day, it was not uncommon for people to share the same name.<sup>5</sup>

## COMMENTARY

**VERSE 1 /** While it might be tempting to skip over all the names listed in Ezra 2, this chapter begins with an important statement about those who came back from Babylon: the returnees came from those captive exiles that King Nebuchadnezzar had deported to Babylon. The Lord had promised through Jeremiah that His people would be preserved (see Jer. 24:6). Isaiah had foretold the day when a new exodus would happen under Cyrus's reign (see Isa. 44:28–45:1). And now, as promised, God's people were allowed to return home.

While the list in Ezra 2 describes the people who returned, it does not tell us when they returned. We know that there were several waves at various times when the people returned to Jerusalem in the early days of the Persian Empire. For this reason, 2:1 connects us back to 1:11—those associated with the province of Judah were the ones who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem. But 2:1 also looks forward to the names that are listed in the verses that follow.

The transition of so many people from Babylon to Judah is a reminder of the steadfast love of the Lord—He released the people who had been captive and gave them freedom. The purpose for these freed captives was to come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple as Cyrus had decreed. First, they had received the articles from the temple (1:7). Now they would return to begin the task of rebuilding.

The language of **“the province”** refers to smaller administrative regions, of which there were 127 in the Persian Empire. These freed captives would be going to the administrative province “Beyond the River,” or “west of the Euphrates River”—the wider region that would have included Judah (see 6:6).<sup>6</sup>

**VERSE 2 /** The names listed here total eleven. A similar list in Nehemiah 7:7, with some variations, includes a twelfth name. These twelve names constituted the restored Israel, the restoration of the

former twelve tribes that had inherited the land under Joshua, demonstrating God's great and providential care to restore His people to their homeland.

At the head of the list is Zerubbabel, whose name meant “seed of Babylon.” He is mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. He was a descendant of David's royal line as the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2,8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1) and a grandson of one of Judah's final kings before the final exile, Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:16-19). He is referred to in the lineage of Christ (Matt. 1:12), showing how he was a pivotal figure linking Judah's past with her future. Through his leading the people home in one of the initial returns, it becomes clear that the Lord was keeping His promise to His people so that a descendant of David would rule on the throne of Israel forever (2 Sam. 7:12ff). Zerubbabel would lead the people so that the temple could be rebuilt (see Ezra 3:2,8; 4:2-3; 5:1-2; 6:14) and they could resettle the land God had given them.

The second name in the list, Jeshua, is a variation of the name Joshua, recalling the one who led Israel into the promised land. Jeshua was from a line of priests (see Ezra 3:2,8,9; 4:4; 5:2; 10:18), and his ancestor Jozadak had also experienced exile under Nebuchadnezzar (see Ezra 5:2; 1 Chron. 6:15). His role as a high priest is referred to in Haggai 1:1,12,14, where his name is spelled “Joshua.”

While other names were significant, it is most important to note how these first two names point towards the resettlement of the land and the promised fulfillment of a seed that would come from Abraham's line and rule as a descendant of David. These two, with the other men, would form the reconstituted Israel and settle the land like in the days of Moses's successor Joshua. The line of kings would carry on, though there would be no throne in Judah, and the priesthood would be reconstituted. Both of these roles pointed forward to the coming of Jesus, both priest and king (Heb. 7–8).

# MY RESPONSE

Because we have been freed from sin and have experienced God's kindness, we make worship our first priority so that others will see the goodness of the Lord.

## HEAD:

God always keeps His promises. Even when times are difficult and hard, God is working to bring about that which is good for His people and glorious for His name's sake. Hard times may come along, but the end of the story is filled with the hope of God's restoring work. The Lord took Israel in her trespasses and sins, purified her, and brought her back to the land. And the Lord can raise sinners dead in their trespasses and sins, bring them out of exile, and carry them all the way home to be with Him forever.

**How does the Jewish return from exile give you hope that God is working out your salvation for your good and His glory?**

## HEART:

Because God keeps His promises to His people, having delivered them from exile and restored their items for temple worship, His people were enabled to worship the Lord. Just as Israel was to rebuild the temple and restore the proper worship of God after their exile, so we should remember our salvation in a way that moves our hearts to worship the Lord. God has brought us out of the exile of sin and death so that we might adore Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

**What are some ways that you can praise God together with your group for His work of salvation in your life?**

## HANDS:

Because God has saved us from the exile of sin and death and brought us to worship Him, our adoration should show our love and thankfulness for God's mercy and grace to us. A life of worship will be displayed with thanksgiving and praise and should cause us to speak of the Lord's goodness to others around us.

**Who will you talk to this week about God's goodness in saving you from sin and death through faith in Jesus?**

NOTES

### VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Look at the influence the Lord has! Are there members of your family who are not interested in building the church, the temple of the Holy Spirit? Ask the Lord to stir their hearts. Do you have friends or neighbors or people in your life that you would love to see moved to join the cause of covering the stage God built with His glory? Do you see the rulers of the world and fear the detrimental effect they could have on the gospel? Seek the Lord to stir their hearts. He can do this great work."<sup>7</sup>

—James M. Hamilton Jr.

## **POINT 1: THE LORD MOVED A LEADER TO FULFILL HIS WORD** (EZRA 1:1-4).

### + **COMMENTARY**

“The expressions in these verses, however, must not be viewed as Cyrus’s embrace of the covenant established by the Lord for his people. Instead, they should be read in light of the Cyrus Cylinder inscription (an ancient clay cylinder written to defend the claims of its king), which credits the primary Babylonian god, Marduk, with establishing Cyrus as ‘king over all the world.’ It also describes the Persian policy of restoring to temples the images (i.e., statues) of their gods previously taken to Babylon. Cyrus restores the gods of various peoples (not just Israel), thus emphasizing his own benevolence toward those gods and also his desire for those peoples’ prayers. In addition, he pronounces his generosity toward the people who dwell in cities over which he now rules. The proclamation of 1:2-4 is therefore politically expedient; Cyrus does for Judah what he does for other nations. In this case, however, the providence of the living God has moved his heart to act. The Lord raises up and deposes rulers for purposes about which such rulers may be oblivious. In this case, the Lord’s immediate purpose is to bring his homeless people home to rebuild his house (i.e., temple). But a deeper goal exists. In abandoning the covenant, God’s people had abandoned their priestly role (Ex. 19:5-6); by restoring them to Jerusalem to rebuild his temple, the Lord revives their priestly function in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

### + **ILLUSTRATION**

While Japan is a very developed country, even rural areas have been designed to maximize space. Crammed into every available space are little paddy fields for growing rice, scattered along the countryside.

In order to grow rice, a good supply of water is needed. Running around and through the grids of rice fields are channels with gates to control the flow of water. If the farmer needs to flood the field, the supply gate is lifted, allowing water to spread across the field until the desired amount is reached. And when the field needs to be drained, the farmer lifts a gate at another point in the field, allowing the water to flow out. The farmer is completely in charge of how the water flows in and out and throughout the fields.

The forces of world history often feel powerful. Superpowers, wars, and rumors of wars can cause us to grow deeply distressed as if nothing can control them. Economic forces change

markets beyond our control. Elections change the ruling party in power, even though we have a single vote. The flow of the supply chain of goods can run smoothly or be interrupted by events that no one could predict. Prices of goods rise and fall based on events and the availability of goods. But behind all of these events is the God of history. Our God reigns, is in control, and like the farmer who opens and closes the gates to let the water flow in the fields, God works throughout human history. He even used unbelievers to bring about the restoration of His people and the rebuilding of His temple.

## **POINT 2: THE LORD ROUSED THE PEOPLE TO REBUILD HIS HOUSE (EZRA 1:5-11).**

### + **COMMENTARY**

“The opening chapter of Ezra offers a revealing insight into the way in which some exiles made sense of the rise of Cyrus and the extraordinary opportunity that arose for them to return to the land that was ‘promised’ (Jer. 29:10). Viewed through the eyes of faith, this opportunity is seen by the Jews as arising not because of Cyrus’s own pragmatism or opportunism, but because YHWH, their God, is God of not only the heavens but also the earth. Ezra 1 insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, the return from exile was YHWH’s idea and his doing, the gracious initiative of a God who is in the habit of remembering and redeeming his people. Evidence for God’s habit of redemption is found in Ezra’s identification of the exiles’ situation with that of their exodus ancestors, whom God returned to the land in fulfillment of the patriarchal promise. Indeed, just as the exodus narrative consciously invites remembrance of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so too Ezra 1 evokes recollections of the God of the exodus who led their ancestors through the wilderness to the promised land. The mechanics and means of redemption are explained, not in economic, social, or political terms, but in spiritual ones—it is God’s spirit who stirs both the powers of this earth and his own people into action, and he does so for one purpose: so that worship of him may be restored.”<sup>9</sup>

### + **OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY**

Consider asking some people in the group who wear glasses to take their glasses off, or have some put on a pair of prescription lenses that are not their own or put on a pair of sunglasses in a dimly lit room. From across the room, hold up a faintly drawn picture and ask them to open their eyes and describe what they see. Then have them use their proper or corrected vision and answer you again.

This is what faith does to our perspective: it clarifies our understanding of what God is doing in the world. Though we might see the exact same situation as others, faith causes us to look with eyes of faith to see how God might be at work to accomplish His purposes.

This is the reason someone can read two different history books on the same subject and yet be surprised by how each one retells the same event or comes to very different conclusions. Though the people who were involved in the events may be the same and the facts be presented fairly, how history is interpreted is often shaped by the lens through which one looks at the world. God’s people have always put on the spectacles of faith so that they might not merely interpret history by what is seen but by what God has said He would do according to His Word.

## POINT 3: THE LORD RESTORED THE FAMILIES TO THEIR HOMES (EZRA 2:1-2).

### + COMMENTARY

“This chapter, however uninviting it may seem, is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. The thousands of homecomers are not lumped together, but (in characteristic biblical fashion) related to those local and family circles which humanize a society and orientate an individual. Such is God’s way, who ‘setteth the solitary in families’ (Ps. 68:8, AV, RV). And for the people’s part, their tenacious memory of places and relationships, still strong after two generations in exile, showed a fine refusal to be robbed of either their past or their future. So these were living portions of Israel, roots and all, for replanting.”<sup>10</sup>

### + COMMENTARY

“The opening words of Ezra’s list are identical to those what begin the parallel list in Nehemiah 7:6. This suggests that the list was probably drawn up after the exiles had settled back in their homeland and may include people who returned at various times. The returnees are described as the people of the province (2:1) because at this time Judah was merely an administrative unit of the Persian Empire . . . Zerubbabel and Joshua were the anointed leaders (Zech 4:11-14). Even though Joshua’s household had let God down, Joshua was the high priest (Zech 3:1-10). Zerubbabel was the governor of the province. He may have owed his position to his ancestry, for he was the son of Shealtiel, the son of the exiled King Jehoiachin (1 Chr 3:17; 2 Kgs 24:8-15).”<sup>11</sup>

### + ILLUSTRATION

Consider having a cutting of a plant that could be rooted, or have a picture of a plant that has been cut and then rooted again for replanting. Discuss how the replanting of a cutting could take hold in its new setting and grow to become great and large like the plant from which it came. Consider the factors that it takes to re-root a plant: sunlight, good soil, some fertilizer, and some tender loving care.

Just as a plant can thrive when it is cut and re-rooted in the right situation, so the Lord had cut His people off not to cause them harm but to re-root His people back into the land. This planting would require them to be tenacious, courageous, and strong. But ultimately, it would be the Lord’s work. He would establish His people following the exile. Just as a plant re-grows as the same species it came from, so the Lord’s people would be replanted in the land as the chosen people of the Lord, kept for His purposes, to fulfill the promises that He had made to Abraham and to David.

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