

Lesson 61

Ezra and the Exiles Return to Rebuild

Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-13



Teacher, please remember that the commentary below is intended to help you in your study, not to be read to your students. Make your own list of applications, using the help from the commentary, but don't necessarily try to cover everything! Think of the students in your class, then be prayerfully selective.

Contents:

1. Preparation
2. Memory verses
3. Theme
4. Lesson introduction
5. Verse by verse commentary (suggested location of activities included)
6. Suggested prayer to close
7. Attention grabbers
8. Activities
9. Bible Text (in full, without commentary)

1. Preparation

- 1) Choose memory verse
- 2) Select attention grabber to start off lesson / break the ice - optional, recommended for younger classes. (see point 7)
- 3) Suggested activities- optional, recommended for younger children (see point 8)

2. Memory verse

PSALM 122:1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."

3. Theme

God will never leave or forsake His people, so out of love we should be faithful to Him!

4. Lesson introduction

(Note: this is a combined lesson that takes in most of chapters one and three in the book of Ezra. Pick out the items you wish to emphasize; you may not be able to cover everything, especially the details of the sacrifices, if you are teaching a younger age group).

Remember that God had warned His people through His prophets that judgment would surely come if they refused to repent from their idolatry and sin. Yet the people's hearts were hard. They refused to turn back to God. Judgment did come. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Judah and Jerusalem, and the people were carried away as captives—slaves to a foreign nation, living in a foreign land. Jerusalem had been left in ruins. Even the temple was destroyed and the articles used in the worship of God were carried away to Babylon.

For a total of 70 years, God's people were in captivity serving the Babylonians. Though the people were suffering the consequences of their refusal to turn away from their sin, God had not forgotten them. God still loved His people. He promised that He would bring a group of His people back out of Babylon after the 70 years. And that is exactly what happened under a new king, named Cyrus. He decreed that the Jewish people could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Under the prophet/priest Ezra that is what they did. Now, with a renewed heart and a determination to obey, the people set themselves to the task at hand. The consequences of sin and rebellion had been devastating to the people of Israel; but now, they would celebrate

God's faithfulness. Today we will find out how that all happened. **God will never leave or forsake His people, so out of love we should be faithful to Him as well!**

5. Verse by Verse Commentary

EZRA 1:1-4

Cyrus, King of Persia, was now the ruler of the entire world. The first year of his reign, he made a proclamation throughout his kingdom and put it in writing. He told the people of his kingdom that God had appointed him as ruler over all the kingdoms and appointed him to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

The people of God had his permission and blessing to go home to build the temple of the Lord God. He told their neighbors to provide them with money, goods and livestock, and freewill offerings to support the rebuilding of God's temple. How amazing! Only God could do this!

God was faithful to keep His Word to His people. God had prophesied through His prophet Jeremiah that those who would be taken into captivity would return after 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10-14). It was now that time! God used Cyrus as His instrument to fulfill His promise and plan. One-hundred and fifty years earlier, Cyrus is actually named by the prophet Isaiah as the one who would "perform His will" in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple (Isaiah 44:28). Note: The Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus, the king of Persia, to make the proclamation to allow the people to return back to their land. God will even use pagan kings and rulers to fulfill His promise and plans. **God will never leave or forsake His people!**

EZRA 1:5

The Lord moved upon the hearts of His people to return to their land and to return to worshipping Him. This was revival! For revival means to bring back to life what was once dead.

Suggested activity: Fishing for God's People

EZRA 1:6

All their neighbors willingly helped them with the money, goods, and freewill offerings to support them just as the king commanded. Not only did the neighbors support them, they gave the people valuable gifts. The people obeyed God's call to return to their land and God provided their every need. It is a true saying, "Where God guides, He provides." God will equip and enable us to do what He has called us to do.

EZRA 1:7-11

King Cyrus brought out the articles for worship that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple and gave them back to be used in temple worship. God provided all that was needed for the restoration of the temple. The 70 years of captivity must have been difficult. Yet, the people learned valuable lessons; for when they returned from their captivity, they had been cured from the worship of idols.

How amazing it must have been to witness the fulfillment of God's promise. About fifty thousand of God's people returned to their own land. God has given us who believe rich promises. In Hebrews 13:5 we read, "...I will never leave you nor forsake you." His promises are sure! **God will never leave or forsake His people.**

Suggested activity: God's People Return Home

EZRA 3:1-3

Finally, the children of Israel gathered together in their homeland to start rebuilding. They would rebuild their lives and their relationship with God--God had taught them much during the 70 years of captivity. And, they would rebuild the temple of the Lord. The task of rebuilding the temple the Babylonians had destroyed 70 years earlier would be overwhelming; yet, because they knew God was with them, they were determined.

The people set up the altar as one of their first official acts. It symbolized God's presence and protection and demonstrated their commitment to serve God alone. Zerubbabel sacrificed burnt offerings as the Law of Moses instructed (Leviticus 1-7). After 70 years of captivity, their attention was now focused on their relationship with God. Daily, they sought the forgiveness of their sins and consecrated their lives to God. Daily, they sought His guidance. How aware the people were of the consequences of disobedience and rebellion to God! The people did not want to go down that path again.

The people were determined to put God first. We read they offered sacrifices to God even though they feared attack from the surrounding people of the land. After the Northern Kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians and her people taken captive in 722 BC, foreigners had been forced to resettle in the land. (It was a common practice of Assyrians to control their conquered people by resettling foreign people into the land they conquered.) The Jews felt threatened, fearing this group of people would want to keep the land of Judah to themselves.

EZRA 3:4-5

The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days. During this time, the people lived in temporary dwellings such as tents and booths just as their ancestors had done many years before as they journeyed through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The feast would remind the people of God's past protection and guidance in the wilderness and of His continued love for them. Restoration with God starts with the heart! The people of God were restoring their worship once again and turning their hearts to God.

EZRA 3:6-9

It took from September to June just to prepare to build the temple. During this time, the altar was built, materials were ordered and collected, and workers were hired. Time must be taken to make preparations if the job was going to be done well.

It took many people working together to accomplish such a task. God has designed that His plans and ministry be accomplished by His children working together. As we consider the ministry of the church today, each member of the body of Christ is vital to His plan and purpose (1 Corinthians 12). May we be faithful to serve the Lord with the talents and gifts God has given us. **Because God is faithful to us, out of love let us be faithful to God.**

Once the altar had been established so they could worship God, the people set out to rebuild the temple foundation; it would be no small task! They would face opposition from their neighbors as well as lack of resources.

Was it a wise move to begin construction of the altar and the temple before the city walls? It certainly seems the walls would have provided the security they needed—protection from the enemy—in order to complete their task. Yet, consider this—if God was not going to protect them, no wall would provide protection for them. After all, the wall stood at one time, but God allowed them to be overtaken by Babylon. It's more important to trust in God—His protection and provision—and to put Him first than to build a wall.

The children of Israel were certainly learning to depend on God! When they were carried off by the Babylonians, they were large in number; now they were few in number, weak, and surrounded by enemies. If ever they needed to rely on God's power, it was now. With a strong sense of dependency on God, they realized the importance of obeying Him from the heart, and not merely out of habit. A sense of dependency on the Lord will strengthen our relationship with God. For, when we must have God's help to complete a task, we give good attention to our relationship with Him.

Suggested activity: "Let's Work Together"

EZRA 3:10-11

At last the temple foundation was finished! Now it was time to celebrate. Completing the foundation required great effort on the part of all involved. Everyone praised God for what had been done through many with His help and enabling. God had provided the talents, abilities, strength, and leadership to do the job. With a God-given desire, the people had remained faithful to what God had called them to do. Let us be faithful to God. The people of Israel had endured great suffering because of their sinful rebellion towards God, but now united together in heart-felt praise, they sang of God's goodness towards them. Though the people had been faithless in the past, God still remained faithful to them, for His love endures forever.

EZRA 3:12-13

Some of the very old men had seen the old temple before its destruction, 70 years prior. These men wept. Looking back and remembering the former glory of Solomon's temple, they were, no doubt, reminded of the devastation of the temple and Jerusalem—the bitter consequences of rebellion against the one true God. What a time of contrasting emotions. Most had never seen the temple and rejoiced greatly at God's goodness and faithfulness; others wept, remembering the former glory of the temple. Both emotions were legitimate. God's work among us can stimulate us both to rejoice over the goodness of His grace and to mourn over our sins that have required Him to intervene. Let us be faithful to God.

The celebration—shouts of joy and sobs of sorrow—was heard from far away. The foundation of the temple had been laid. God had been faithful to bring His people out of captivity and fulfill His promise to rebuild the temple. The consequences of sin had been devastating. Yet, God had not forsaken His people. He remained faithful in His commitment to them. Seventy years later, His people, with a renewed heart, were faithful in their response to Him and worked hand-and-hand, side-by-side, to see His purposes accomplished.

God is faithful to us. Let us be faithful to God! May we offer our lives--our talents and abilities--to serve Him and see His purposes accomplished. God has great blessings in store for those who will choose His path.

Suggested activity: We Need Each Other to Do God's Work

6. Prayer

Lead the children in a prayer of thanksgiving for God's promise that he will never abandon His people, and of commitment to be faithful and obedient to God and to use their talents and abilities for Him. If there are any children who have not yet responded to the Gospel, give them opportunity.

7. Attention-getters

God's Chosen People

What you will need:

Ten to twelve stickers (hearts would be good) and a marker.

Copies of the "Fishing for God's People" template (one for each child), crayons or markers, paper clips, tape, scissors, string or yarn, 2 – 3 yardsticks or similar length sticks, and 2 – 3 magnets.

Construction paper (various desert and landscape colors), scissors, glue, crayons and/or markers, and a "God's People Return Home" template for each child.

God's chosen people were now living in a foreign land, Babylon. God will call them out of this foreign country and bring them back to their own land. God loves His people. This game will help to show us what it means to be "chosen."

You will need some stickers (hearts would be good; you will need 10 – 12 stickers) and a marker. Ask the children, "Who has any of the following letters in their names – J, B, or L?" It can be the first letter or any letter in between. Have the children raise their hands. For the younger children you will need to help with the letters.

Give the children who have these letters in their name a heart sticker. They will have the privilege of being servants for the day since they have been “called out.” Have these children do the following for the other class members: pass out papers, clean up, and allow the other children to go first for the rest of the day. Discuss with the class what it means to be “called out” from this world and how that since we are God’s special people we need to serve others and be a light in this world.

Working Side By Side :

What you will need:

Several drinking straws and one large balloon per team.

Two balloons from the previous game and masking tape.

Construction paper, butcher paper, scissors, markers, and glue sticks.

For this game you will need several drinking straws and one large balloon per team. The object is to see which team can blow up their balloon by working together. (The straw will need to fit snug in opening of balloon for this game to work.)

Cut the straws into 3 equal pieces. Give each child a piece. Choose teams (number will depend on class size, 5 per team is a good number). Have the teams line up with their straws.

Give the first person in the line a balloon. The children will use the straw to blow the balloon up with one big breath. Then they will pass it to the next person who will insert their straw into the balloon and blow one big breath. It is important that they only blow one breath. They will also need to be careful not to let any air out of the balloon as it is passed. At the end of the line after everyone has had a chance to complete their blowing, compare balloon size and determine a winner.

God brought His people back to their homeland. They worked together to build the altar and the temple. God wants us to be faithful to do what He has called us to do. Note: Save your balloons from this activity for another game later.

8. Activities

Fishing for God’s People In the New Testament, Jesus said that He would make us fishers of men. When the time came for God’s people to return to their land, God just reached in and “fished out” His people and brought them back to Jerusalem to build the temple. This game will help us to be thankful that God “fished” us out of this world, making us His children.

You will need copies of the template (one for each child), crayons or markers, paper clips, tape, scissors, string or yarn, 2 – 3 yardsticks or similar length sticks, and 2 – 3 magnets. Using the enclosed template, have the children cut out a fish. Allow them to color and write their name on a fish. Next tape a paper clip to the front of the fish. Place all of the fish into a cardboard box.

Make fishing poles using yardsticks and string. Attach a magnet at the end of the line. Give the children each a turn fishing. As the children catch the fish, have them find the person whose name is on the fish. Have them hand the fish to that person and say, “God will never leave or forsake you!”

God’s People Return Home

In this craft, the children will be making a mural to remind them that God brought His people out of captivity and back to their own land. You will need construction paper (various desert and landscape colors), scissors, glue, crayons and markers, and a template (enclosed with curriculum).

To begin with, use a blue or white piece of construction paper to serve as a background. (Blue can represent the sky.) Make copies of the template and cut out the mountains and people for the children to glue on the

background. (You may want to use desert color construction paper to make the mountain background.) Color the people. Draw in plants, sun, clouds, etc. During the craft, ask the children how they might feel if they were given a chance to return home after living in a foreign land for 70 years. Do they think the people were excited?

“Let’s Work Together”

The goal of this game is to work as a team and finish “your share” of the work on the foundation of the temple. You will need the 2 balloons from the previous game and masking tape.

Before class, mark out with the tape a large rectangle in the middle of the floor. Choose 2 teams and have them stand around the rectangle. Each team should stand on 2 connecting sides of the rectangle (“L” shape). Blow up the balloons and hand them to the first person in each team.

On your command, the children will be passing the balloon between their legs to the person behind them, then over their head to the next person. They will continue passing until they get to the end of the line in their team. The first team that gets the balloon to the end of their line has to wait for the other team to get their balloon to the end. At that point, the person at the end of the line will walk up to the front of their team line. Then at your command go through the same process.

Keep doing this until everyone has gone through the line. When they are done, gather the children and ask them what they noticed happening (the line began to move a little each time the person from the back of the line came forward). Working together as brothers and sisters in the Lord’s body, we can make progress just as the Israelites did on the temple.

“We Need Each Other to Do God’s Work!”

This craft will be a project you can work on together to decorate the bulletin board or wall in your classroom. You will need construction paper, butcher paper, scissors, markers, and glue sticks.

Use a large sheet of butcher paper for the background. Using construction or another piece of butcher paper (different color), cut out a large circle. In the middle of the circle write, “We Need Each Other to Do God’s Work!” Next give each child a piece of regular paper. Have them trace their hands and write their names on the hands. They can then cut out the pictures of their hands and decorate them in any other way they would like to. Next, paste the hands to the bulletin board.

As you do this craft, talk about the importance of working together while doing God’s work and what it means to be faithful to God.

9. Scripture text

Ezra 1:1-11, Cyrus Helps the Exiles to Return

¹ In 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 he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any 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. ⁴ And 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 freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

⁵ Then 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. ⁶ All 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.

⁷ Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. ^[a]

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

⁹ This was the inventory:

gold dishes	30
silver dishes	1,000
silver pans ^[b]	29
¹⁰ gold bowls	30
matching silver bowls	410
other articles	1,000

¹¹ In 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.

Ezra 3:3-13, Rebuilding the Altar

³ When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. ² Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices. ⁴ Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the

required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. ⁵ After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. ⁶ On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.

Rebuilding the Temple

⁷ Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

⁸ In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak and the rest of the people (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work. They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD. ⁹ Joshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah^[a]) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers—all Levites—joined together in supervising those working on the house of God.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

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