

## UNIT 17

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**TAKE REFUGE**

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**IN THE LORD**

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# “Jerusalem Will Be Raised Up”

by James Jackson

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 (Exodus 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.

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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

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## Believers today are God's temple, and He reveals Himself to us when we make worshipping Him our priority.

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 (Zechariah 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 (Matthew 27:51-54).

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 (Zechariah 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 worshipping Him our priority. And God desires to do a restoration project in the lives of His children today!



# A PEOPLE RETURNED

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

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

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Ezra 1–2

**+** **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 towards 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.

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Proverbs 21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Proverbs 21:1**

## NOTES

Sit and watch a river flow and you will notice how every drop of water is carried along. The bends and twists of a river, the drop in the landscape, and the levelling out at the entrance to a larger body of water cause the flow to be directed to their end. But when irrigation is needed to a nearby field, a farmer may channel the water and regulate its flow. By shaping the banks or by trenching a new path, the water can be redirected as needed.

In a similar way, God does not have to coerce or force the hearts of political leaders to get them to do what He desires. By His providence and gracious hand, the Lord is able to move and guide them to accomplish His purposes. He may simply move the heart of a leader by bringing about circumstances that guide the flow where He wants it to go. Like the banks of a river direct the stream, so the Lord can move the path of history in ways that might surprise us as human beings.

The Lord brought Cyrus to power, just as He had foretold through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 44:28–45:1), and through Cyrus, He brought about the return of the exiles. By bringing down Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians and raising up Cyrus and the Persians, Scripture was fulfilled.

History is not outside of the control of God. No human ruler is supreme. If the Lord can fulfill His purposes by bringing about circumstances that move a king's heart, how much more is the Lord able to direct your steps and change your path.

**Reflect upon your own life. How has the Lord brought about circumstances to bring you to Himself?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Ezra 1:1-4**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 1:4**

## NOTES



### 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.

The thought of your home being robbed or cleaned out by someone is a terrifying thought and experience, especially if family heirlooms are taken.

When the Lord's house was raided and destroyed by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, the precious and sacred furniture and artifacts that had been made centuries earlier under Moses's leadership had been removed and taken to Babylon, placed in their temple, and treated as spoils of war. The Babylonian's actions made it appear as though the God of Israel had been subdued and subjugated to servitude under the Babylonian regime.

When Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians and the Persians came to power, his returning and reinstatement of the temple furniture and artifacts to the Jews would have seemed absolutely incredible. Like stolen objects being returned to their rightful owner, the Lord's sacred objects had been returned so that His people might rebuild the temple and restore proper worship to the God who rules over all.

Yet this reinstatement of the Lord's belongings was also coupled with the neighbors of the Jewish people also giving them items to rebuild the Lord's temple. God had not only moved Cyrus's heart to rebuild the house of the Lord, He also moved the hearts of people around the Jews to see the restoration of the worship of God.

Centuries earlier, God had moved the hearts of the Egyptians to a similar effect. At the first exodus, the Jewish people received gifts from their neighbors that would go toward the building of the tabernacle (see Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36). Now several centuries later, God was moving people's hearts again so that His temple might be restored and His people might be encouraged in the proper worship of their sovereign God.

**What should the believer's attitude be toward giving to the work and ministry of the church?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Ezra 1:5-11**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 1:5**

## NOTES

After a great fire, there is a lot of work to do to rebuild and restore a house. The old rubble has to be cleared. The structure has to be secured. In some cases, the fire has caused such incredible destruction that the foundation has to be laid again and the entire building has to start from scratch. It can take months, sometimes years, to rebuild. Insurance claims and adjustments have to be made, building materials and contractors have to be secured, and then the work can begin!

After the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, they destroyed the house of the Lord, taking all of the sacred items and burning the building (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-19). The size of the task to rebuild this temple after all of this destruction was enormous. It would take a lot of motivation and encouragement. Even with the blessing of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4), the people would still have to do the hard work of clearing away the rubble and starting over.

Where would the motivation come from to undertake this enormous task? We are told that it was God who roused the spirit of the people to go and rebuild the house of the Lord. God would stir the hearts of the people. God would cause the people to long for the restoration of worship. God would bring them back to their homeland with the passion and drive to honor the Lord.

Worship begins with God moving the hearts of His people to love and adore Him. And when God moves in their hearts, God's people will desire to honor Him with all of their lives, showing that He is worthy of praise.

**How does the Lord's grace motivate you to worship and adore Him?**



# DAY 4

## READ:

Ezra 1

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 1:7

## NOTES

Some people enjoy the hunt for hidden treasures. Taking a GPS device and directions from online websites, people will track down hidden treasures that other people have put in particular locations for others to find. This worldwide phenomenon known as geocaching allows people to discover things that have been placed in unusual spots. In rural areas, geocaches have been hidden in hollow logs, under bridges, or in the crook of trees. In urban areas, these items are hidden in the crevices of buildings, along highway embankments, and under permanent structures. People love to find these items, bring them out, and look at what has been hidden away.

Even better than searching for hidden treasure, however, is to have that treasure brought out to you. When God's people were preparing to return to Jerusalem, Cyrus brought out the greatest treasure the people could long for: the articles from the temple. These items were of great significance for Israel. These were not just hidden treasures that had sentimental value. These items connected Israel to their past, recalling God's saving work at the first exodus. Now, having these items back would have brought to mind God's saving work among His people so long ago and given the people assurance that God was doing something similar in their day.

But these lost treasures were not just a reminder of a past salvation, they would tell the people of a new exodus. God was bringing His people home and establishing them in the land that He had promised to them so long ago.

**What is the significance of some items you may have kept to remind you of God's work of salvation in your life?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Ezra 2**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 2:2**

## NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"God knows who we are—he knows our names. We have become sons and daughters of the King (Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 1:5). We need to live so that we will honour both our family names and the name of our Lord. Bring honour to the name of 'Christian,' as one who follows Christ."<sup>1</sup>

—Africa Study Bible

We typically choose names for children with great intentionality. We may choose a name to honor someone we love, to reflect an important event in our lives, or because of the special meaning of the name. Our children receive our last name as a reminder of their history and connection to us and their family heritage.

The names in the Old Testament functioned in a similar way but often with a greater degree of importance. Names were given as an expression of hope in the future, a connection to the past, and sometimes as a prophetic expression of what was to come. Zerubbabel was one of those names. Raised as a child in exile, Zerubbabel was born from the royal family line of King David. His grandfather was one of the last kings of Judah before the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, laid siege to destroy Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 24–25).

Yet for all of his family's failures to live up to the ideal kingship, Zerubbabel was given the prominent place in the list of returnees. His name means "seed of Babylon," and he led the returnees back from captivity to rebuild the temple and restore the worship of the Lord in the land. Along with the other eleven leaders (see Nehemiah 7:7), Zerubbabel represented the hope of a restored Israel. Zerubbabel carried in himself out of Babylon the hope for the seed that would come from the woman and crush the serpent (see Genesis 3:15), for through him would the line of David carry on and lead to the promised Christ (see Ezra 3:2; Matthew 1:12).

What's in a name? For the people who came with Zerubbabel, there was the promise of God of something new after exile—a future with hope and promise that the Lord would fulfill His purposes through His people.

**Why do people spend so much time deciding on a name for a child? What does your name mean and is there significance behind it?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## **POINT 1: The Lord moved a leader to fulfill His word** (Ezra 1:1-4).

Through Cyrus, God stayed true to His \_\_\_\_\_, fulfilling His word in bringing the \_\_\_\_\_ of Israel back to their land.

**?** How should knowing the Lord fulfill His promises cause us to read His Word?

Throughout \_\_\_\_\_, including Cyrus's actions, God is sovereign over all, bringing about His \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

**?** What difference should God's providence, His control of all things, make in how we view history?

## **POINT 2: The Lord roused the people to rebuild His house** (Ezra 1:5-11).

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

The Lord roused the hearts of leaders and His people so that proper \_\_\_\_\_ of Him could be \_\_\_\_\_ and sustained.

**?** How should God's care for the details of His worship move our hearts to worship Him better?

## **POINT 3: The Lord restored the families to their homes** (Ezra 2:1-2).

### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #11: GOD IS UNCHANGING**

God's being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This

### **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>2</sup>

—A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's unchanging \_\_\_\_\_ is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find \_\_\_\_\_ 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 \_\_\_\_\_ .



**How might God's unchanging nature encourage you during hard times?**

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

## 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:** How does the Jewish return from exile give you hope that God is working out your salvation for your good and His glory?
- **HEART:** What are some ways that you can praise God together with your group for His work of salvation in your life?
- **HANDS:** Who will you talk to this week about God's goodness in saving you from sin and death through faith in Jesus?

## 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>3</sup>

—James M. Hamilton Jr.