

# Freed from Captivity

Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70  
SS Lesson for 03/06/2022

**Devotional Scripture:** Isa 44:24-28

## OUTLINE

### LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

*Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary*

*Key Verse: Ezra 2:68*

*Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary*

### MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

#### FREED BY DIVINE INTERVENTION ON A KING (EZRA 1:1-4)

*God stirred up the spirit of the King (1-2)*

God directs the heart of all kings (Prov 21:1)

God established all authorities (Rom 13:1)

The kings of the earth belong to God (Ps 47:9)

It is God's plans and purposes that all nations must perform (Ps 33:10-11)

When a king's heart becomes arrogant, God knows how to humble him (Dan 5:18-21)

*God provided the release of the people (3-4)*

God releases His people because He hears their cries (Ps 69:33)

God releases His people because He looks down from on high (Ps 102:19-20)

God releases His people because He came to do so (Luke 4:17-21)

God releases His people because He rescues through Jesus (Col 1:13)

God releases His people because upholds their cause (Ps 146:7)

God releases His people because it is His favor (Isa 49:8-9)

#### FREED BY DIVINE INTERVENTION ON SPIRITUAL LEADERS (EZRA 1:5-6)

*God stirred up the spirit of the leaders (5)*

God stirs the hearts of leaders so that they are aware that it is God who provides strength (Zech 12:4-6)

God stirs the hearts of leaders to strengthen their faith (1 Tim 3:9,13)

God stirs the hearts of leaders according to His good purpose (Phil 2:13)

God stirs the hearts of leaders as they follow the example of Jesus (1 Cor 11:1)

God stirs the hearts of leaders as part of the gift of being a leader (1 Tim 4:14)

*People supported the leaders (6)*

People should support their leaders because of consideration of their works (Heb 13:7)

People should support their leaders to make their work a joy (Heb 13:17)

People should support their leaders because they deserve it (1 Cor 9:11-12)

People should support their leaders because it will be credited to the people's spiritual account (Phil 4:17-18)

People should support their leaders because there is a reward for doing so (Matt 10:41-42)

People should support their leaders because of the judgment (Matt 25:34-40)

People should support their leaders because God will remember it (Heb 6:10)

#### FREED BY DIVINE INTERVENTION THROUGH BLESSINGS (EZRA 1:7-11)

*Blessings of the returned vessels (7)*

A blessing because it is God who gathers up treasures (Joel 3:5-7)

A blessing because when valuables are lost, one rejoices much when they are returned (Luke 15:8-9)

A blessing because many times God blesses with more than what was taken (Job 42:10-12)

A blessing because when the lost returns, it is like bringing the dead back to life (Luke 15:20-24)

A blessing because there is more happiness over the recovered lost than for all that remained (Matt 18:10-14)

*Blessings of entrustment (8)*

Entrustment that has been earned through being honest with little and now being given much (Luke 16:10-12)

Entrustment that results in one being given charge over many things (Matt 25:21)

Entrustment where much is demanded when much has been given (Luke 12:48)

Entrustment that has been proven through faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2)

Entrustment that requires the help of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14)

Leaders have an entrustment of God's work (Titus 1:7-9)

All saints have been given an entrustment of faith (Jude 1:3)

#### FREED THROUGH THE PEOPLE RETURNING (EZRA 2:64-70)

*Returning to an assembly (64-67)*

Assembled to simulate love and good deeds (Heb 10:23-25)

Assembled in the presence of God (Matt 18:20)  
Assembled for fellowship (Acts 2:42-47)  
Assembled for prayer (Acts 1:14)  
*Returning with an offering (68-70)*  
Offering that is done willingly (2 Cor 8:12)  
Offering that is offered right (Gen 4:2-7)  
Offering that is given out of love (Eph 5:1-2)  
Offering that is sacrificial (Phil 4:16-18)  
Offering that is from a steadfast faith (2 Tim 4:6-8)

## CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

*The Decree of Cyrus: The First Wave of Exiles Return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4:24)*

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE ECHOES COMMENTARY

## Lesson Background and Key Verse

### Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The first chapters of Ezra tell the story of a grand reconstruction project for Israel. Older Israelites had vivid memories of their pre-exilic life (Ezra 3:12); however, memories alone would not complete the reconstruction project. Israel needed help from an unlikely source. Their memories, combined with unlikely assistance, set Israel on the path of following God's requirement as they resettled their homeland. The text of Ezra tells the story of the Jewish people during the sixth and fifth centuries BC. In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, laid siege to Judah and destroyed Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:10-14; 25:1-10; 2 Chronicles 36:17; Jeremiah 52:4-5, 12-16). The siege's culmination was the destruction of the Jewish temple and the removal of its treasures (2 Kings 24:13; 2 Chronicles 36:18-19; Jeremiah 52:13). The removal of the treasures and the people of Judah was prophesied by Isaiah (2 Kings 20:16-17). The Babylonians carried the people of Judah, with the exception of the poorest individuals, into captivity (24:14; 2 Chronicles 36:20; compare Deuteronomy 28:36). However, Babylon's rule was short-lived. In 539 BC, the Persian King Cyrus destroyed the Babylonian Empire. He solidified the Persian Empire's dominance in a region that extended from modern-day Greece to modern-day India. Cyrus demonstrated tolerance of the religious practices of his subjects. A notable decree in this regard was written on a clay cylinder and is known as the Cyrus Cylinder. This decree detailed Cyrus's conquest of Babylon and the favor he sought from Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. The decree culminated with the command to repatriate exiled peoples and rebuild their houses of worship. Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus, commissioned by the Lord, would provide an opportunity for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland (Isaiah 44:28). Cyrus's decree fulfilled a promise made earlier by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10, 14). However, the prophecy's fulfillment did not necessitate the return of all exiles, only a "remnant" (Isaiah 10:22).

### Key Verse: Ezra 2:68

*Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place*

### Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

**1:1. Cyrus, the king of the extensive Persian realm, drafted a proclamation** that allowed the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild their temple. **Cyrus** made the proclamation in his **first year** (538 B.C.). This was the first year of his reign over Babylon, but he had been king over other territories for more than 20 years. He had been in power since 559 when he became the king of Anshan. Then he became **king of Medo-Persia** about 550 B.C. He conquered Babylon in October 539, and became the king of Babylon, a title of honor denoting the highest position in the civilized world. As is evidenced from Cyrus' attitude concerning the God of Israel (whom he did not worship) he was not a true believer in Yahweh. Cyrus' concern was to establish strong buffer states around his empire which would be loyal to him. Also by having his subject peoples resettled in their own countries he hoped to have the gods in various parts of his empire praying for him to his gods Bel and Nebo. The famous Cyrus Cylinder (538 B.C.), which records his capture of Babylon and his program of repatriating his subject peoples in their homelands, includes this statement: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities daily ask Bel and Nebo for a long

life for me.” The fulfilling of Jeremiah’s words (Jer. 29:10; cf. Jer. 25:11-12) was totally God’s doing. Seventy years of Jewish captivity in Babylon were about to end. The first deportation of Jews to Babylon was in 605 B.C. Cyrus’ decree in 538 was 67 years later. By the time the people returned and built the altar in 536, 70 years were almost up. The edict came about because **the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus**. The Hebrew words translated “moved the heart” (also trans. “stirred [up] the spirit”) were a favorite expression of biblical writers in the postexilic period (Ezra 1:5; 1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Chron. 21:16, “aroused”; 36:22; Jer. 51:11; Hag. 1:14). This shows the sovereign hand of God behind the events of history.

**1:2-3. Cyrus said that Yahweh, the God of heaven, had appointed him to build a temple... at Jerusalem.** Part of this decree is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:23. Also the decree was filed in Ecbatana, where Darius I found it about 520-518 B.C. (Ezra 6:1-5). God had promised the Jewish remnant that He would raise up Cyrus as His servant to restore the fortunes of His people (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13). Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, the Prophet Isaiah referred to Cyrus by name about 150 years before the king made his decree. Josephus wrote that Cyrus was shown the prophecy in Isaiah 44:28 and wanted to fulfill it (*The Antiquities of the Jews* 11. 1. 1). “The God of heaven” is a title of God used 9 times in Ezra (1:2; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; 7:12, 21, 23 [twice]—more than in any other Bible book—and 10 times in other exilic and postexilic books (2 Chron. 36:23; Neh. 1:4-5; 2:4, 20; Dan. 2:18-19, 28, 37, 44). Elsewhere in the Old Testament that phrase occurs only four times (Gen. 14:19, 22; 2 Chron. 2:12; Ps. 115:15). It points to God’s sovereignty. He is the One who made heaven (Gen. 14:19, 22; 2 Chron. 2:12; Ps. 115:15), who is in heaven (Deut. 4:39; 1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; Ecc. 5:2), and who reigns from His throne in heaven (Isa. 66:1). Though Cyrus was a monarch over an extensive empire, Yahweh is far greater for He rules from heaven. The emphasis in Ezra 1:2-3 on **the temple** sets the tone for this and other postexilic books. The temple was of utmost importance in the life of the people of Israel. Without the temple there could be no sacrificial system, which was the nation’s lifeblood in its relationship to **God**. “The God of heaven” (v. 2) is also **the God of Israel** who Cyrus said was **in Jerusalem**.

**1:4.** Cyrus’ edict also instructed the returnees’ neighbors in Persia to give them the equivalent of money (**silver and gold**), material **goods... livestock**, and **freewill offerings** (cf. v. 6). The freewill offerings were **for the temple** and the other gifts were for the people themselves. This is reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt when God miraculously took the nation out of bondage and had the Egyptians aid them with gifts of silver, gold, and clothing (Ex. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). Now God was effecting a new “Exodus,” again bringing His people who had been in bondage back into the land of promise, much as He had done under Moses and Joshua. The people had been in bondage to Babylon because of their failure to keep their covenantal obligations, which Moses had given them during the first Exodus. Once more God was miraculously working in the life of the nation.

**1:5-11.** The religious leaders (**priests and Levites**) along with the **heads** of the two tribes (**Judah and Benjamin**) that had been taken into exile by the Babylonians spearheaded the return to Israel to rebuild the temple, **the house of the LORD**. The Jews who returned totaled 49,897 (2:64-65). The **neighbors** of the returnees obeyed the king’s decree by contributing to the effort (1:6). Even **Cyrus** contributed to the return by giving back **the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD**. These were the **dishes... pans... bowls, and other articles** (vv. 9-10) **Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple** in 605 B.C. (Dan. 1:2), in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:13), and in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:14-15; Jer. 27:16; 52:18-19; cf. Ezra 5:14; 6:5; Dan. 5:2-3) and placed in a **temple** in Babylon, perhaps the Esagila temple built in honor of the god Marduk. **Mithredath** is a Persian name, and the word for **treasurer** (*gizbār*) is also Persian. In Ezra 1:9-10 the **articles** total 2,499 but in verse 11 the total number of **gold and silver** items was **5,400**. Why the difference? Surely Ezra would not be so foolish as to make a major mistake such as that when he so carefully wrote the rest of the book under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. Even if one were to assume (as do many critics) that a redactor brought together in verses 9-11 two variant traditions, it would seem likely that Ezra would try to reconcile them in some way. It seems better to suppose Ezra first listed some of the items, perhaps the bigger and more valuable ones (vv. 9-10), then referred to the total number of items both the larger and more valuable and the smaller and less significant (v. 11). Another problem pertains to **Sheshbazzar** (v. 11), who was called **the prince of Judah** (v. 8). Three views about his identity are suggested: (1) Some feel that **Sheshbazzar** was a Persian name for Zerubbabel. Both are said to have laid the foundation of the temple (3:8-10; 5:16). Zerubbabel, which means “begotten in Babel,” was a grandson of Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:17-19), who had been deported to Babylon but had been released from confinement (2 Kings 25:27-30). Zerubbabel’s relationship to Jehoiachin would explain the title “the prince of Judah.” However, it would seem strange that Zerubbabel would have a second pagan name rather than having one name that reflected Yahweh worship (Sheshbazzar being a pagan deity). If Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar were two names of the same person, it is strange that he was never again referred to by the

name Sheshbazzar except in Ezra 5:15-16. (2) A second view is that this man was a Jew who was appointed governor by Cyrus but who died shortly after arriving in Palestine and was replaced by Zerubbabel. Though plausible, no solid evidence exists for this view. (3) A third view is that Sheshbazzar was the Shenazzar in 1 Chronicles 3:17, and therefore was Zerubbabel's uncle. (4) A fourth view is that Sheshbazzar was a Persian official who was sent to oversee the use of the king's money and to make sure the king's wishes were carried out. It has been suggested that because Sheshbazzar was a Persian official the returnees later referred to him (Ezra 5:15-16) to support their claim of legitimacy for their building project. (See 5:13-16.)

**2:1-63.** The list is divided into several parts. All of **the people of the province** (i.e., of **Judah**) returned to their hometowns (v. 1). Ezra first recorded the 11 civil and religious leaders who were prominent (v. 2). **Jeshua** was the high priest (3:2); his name is spelled Joshua in the Books of Haggai and Zechariah. He was a grandson of Seraiah (cf. 1 Chron. 6:14 with Hag. 1:1), a priest whom **Nebuchadnezzar** killed at Riblah (2 Kings 25:18-21). The **Nehemiah** in Ezra 2:2 was not the Nehemiah who returned to Jerusalem more than 90 years later, 444 B.C. Nor was the **Mordecai** here Esther's cousin (Es. 2:5-7), who lived in Susa about 60 years after the Jews' first return. Nehemiah 7:7 records 12 names rather than 11 (cf. Ezra 2:2). (Three names have different spellings. In verse 2 **Seraiah**, **Reelaiah**, and **Rehum** are probably the same persons as Azariah, Raamiah, and Nehum, respectively, in Neh. 7:7.) Nahamani's name, not in Ezra's list, may have been dropped out by an early scribal error in the copying of the original manuscripts. It is likely that 12 men would have originally been listed as symbolic heads of the 12-tribe nation (cf. 12 male goats offered for the 12 tribes of Israel, Ezra 6:17). Then Ezra listed people by their 18 families and clans, totaling 15,604 (2:3-20). Next came a listing of inhabitants (totaling 8,540) from 21 towns and villages (vv. 21-35). Then **the priests** (4,289 of them) were listed (vv. 36-39), followed by 341 **Levites** which included **singers** and **gatekeepers** (vv. 40-42). **The temple servants** (vv. 43-54) and **descendants of the royal servants** (vv. 55-58) totaled **392**. The **652** returnees who **could not** clearly trace their ancestry (vv. 59-63) were listed last. **The priests** who could not delineate their genealogies were not allowed by **the governor** (*tiršāṭā*, a Persian term, possibly a reference to Sheshbazzar [cf. 1:8] or to Zerubbabel) **to eat... the most sacred food till a priest was ministering with the Urim and Thummim**. The Urim and Thummim were parts of the high priest's breastplate, probably two stones used in some way in determining God's will (cf. Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; 1 Sam. 28:6; Neh. 7:65). Though such a list of names and locations seems unnecessary to some modern readers, it would have been of great encouragement to the original readers as they saw their own families and towns represented.

**2:64-67.** When added together the numbers in verses 2-42, 58, and 60 which list the returnees come to 29,829 (including the 11 prominent men listed in v. 2). However, the total in verses 64-65—**the whole company**—is 49,897. The larger number may include women and children. It may also include Jews from the 10 Northern tribes who might have joined the remnant of the two Southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (cf. 1:5). It may also have included the priests who could not delineate their genealogies (2:61-62). Ezra's grand total of 49,897 is very close to Nehemiah's total of 49,942 (Neh. 7:66-67). Nehemiah's extra 45 people are in the singers (Ezra had 200 but Nehemiah referred to 245). This may have been a scribal error, an error not in the original manuscripts but in the numerous copyings of the text in its transmission. A scribe, in copying Nehemiah 7:67, may have inadvertently picked up the 245 in verse 68, in reference to mules, and inserted that number for the 200 singers. This kind of error may also account for several variations in the other numbers in these lists. (For further discussion see Neh. 7.) Even the animals were counted—a total of 8,136, most of them **donkeys**, commonly used for riding (Ezra 2:66-67). The journey from Babylon to Israel was about 900 miles and took about four months (cf. 7:8-9), but Ezra did not state how long the return trip took. His focus was not on the people's hardships but on their task of rebuilding the temple.

**2:68-69.** When the returnees **arrived** back in Palestine **at the house of the LORD** (i.e., at its location site) they **gave** of their possessions **according to their ability**. They gave large amounts of money and material to begin the temple-building project. The list of precious metals and materials differs from the corresponding list in Nehemiah 7:70-72. Ezra's **61,000 drachmas of gold** are 41,000 in Nehemiah. Ezra recorded **5,000 minas of silver** while Nehemiah referred to 4,200. Ezra mentioned **100 priestly garments** whereas Nehemiah recorded 597. These differences were probably early scribal errors.

**2:70.** The people then **settled in** their ancestors' **towns** and villages.

## Major Theme Analysis

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Freed by Divine Intervention on a King (Ezra 1:1-4)**

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

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 appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3 Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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 Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.

### **God stirred up the spirit of the King (1-2)**

*God directs the heart of all kings (Prov 21:1)*

1 The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

*God established all authorities (Rom 13:1)*

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

*The kings of the earth belong to God (Ps 47:9)*

9 The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.

*It is God's plans and purposes that all nations must perform (Ps 33:10-11)*

10 The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. 11 But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

*When a king's heart becomes arrogant, God knows how to humble him (Dan 5:18-21)*

18 "O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. 19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. 20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

### **God provided the release of the people (3-4)**

*God releases His people because He hears their cries (Ps 69:33)*

33 The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.

*God releases His people because He looks down from on high (Ps 102:19-20)*

19 "The LORD looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he viewed the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death."

*God releases His people because He came to do so (Luke 4:17-21)*

17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:  
18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

*God releases His people because He rescues through Jesus (Col 1:13)*

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,

*God releases His people because upholds their cause (Ps 146:7)*

7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free,

*God releases His people because it is His favor (Isa 49:8-9)*

8 This is what the LORD says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, 9 to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'  
"They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

### ***Freed by Divine Intervention on Spiritual Leaders (Ezra 1:5-6)***

5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.

### **God stirred up the spirit of the leaders (5)**

*God stirs the hearts of leaders so that they are aware that it is God who provides strength (Zech 12:4-6)*

5 Then the leaders of Judah will say in their hearts, 'The people of Jerusalem are strong, because the LORD Almighty is their God.' 6 "On that day I will make the leaders of Judah like a firepot in a woodpile, like a flaming torch among sheaves. They will consume right and left all the surrounding peoples, but Jerusalem will remain intact in her place.

*God stirs the hearts of leaders to strengthen their faith (1 Tim 3:9,13)*

9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 13 Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

*God stirs the hearts of leaders according to His good purpose (Phil 2:13)*

13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

*God stirs the hearts of leaders as they follow the example of Jesus (1 Cor 11:1)*

11:1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

*God stirs the hearts of leaders as part of the gift of being a leader (1 Tim 4:14)*

14 Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

## **People supported the leaders (6)**

*People should support their leaders because of consideration of their works (Heb 13:7)*

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

*People should support their leaders to make their work a joy (Heb 13:17)*

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*People should support their leaders because they deserve it (1 Cor 9:11-12)*

11 If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

*People should support their leaders because it will be credited to the people's spiritual account (Phil 4:17-18)*

17 Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

*People should support their leaders because there is a reward for doing so (Matt 10:41-42)*

41 Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. 42 And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

*People should support their leaders because of the judgment (Matt 25:34-40)*

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

*People should support their leaders because God will remember it (Heb 6:10)*

10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

## **Freed by Divine Intervention through Blessings (Ezra 1:7-11)**

7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;

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

9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;

1030 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles.

11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

## **Blessings of the returned vessels (7)**

*A blessing because it is God who gathers up treasures (Joel 3:5-7)*

5 For you took my silver and my gold and carried off my finest treasures to your temples. 6 You sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, that you might send them far from their homeland. 7 'See, I am going to rouse them out of the places to which you sold them, and I will return on your own heads what you have done.

*A blessing because when valuables are lost, one rejoices much when they are returned (Luke 15:8-9)*

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'

*A blessing because many times God blesses with more than what was taken (Job 42:10-12)*

10 After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. 11 All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. 12 The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first.

*A blessing because when the lost returns, it is like bringing the dead back to life (Luke 15:20-24)*

20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

*A blessing because there is more happiness over the recovered lost than for all that remained (Matt 18:10-14)*

10 "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. 12 "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

## **Blessings of entrustment (8)**

*Entrustment that has been earned through being honest with little and now being given much (Luke 16:10-12)*

10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

*Entrustment that results in one being given charge over many things (Matt 25:21)*

21 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

*Entrustment where much is demanded when much has been given (Luke 12:48)*

48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

*Entrustment that has been proven through faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2)*

2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.



*Entrustment that requires the help of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14)*

14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

*Leaders have an entrustment of God's work (Titus 1:7-9)*

7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. 8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. 9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

*All saints have been given an entrustment of faith (Jude 1:3)*

3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

***Freed though the People Returning (Ezra 2:64-70)***

64 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty,  
65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred men and women singers.  
66 Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five,  
67 their camels four hundred and thirty-five, and their donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty.  
68 Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place:  
69 According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly garments.  
70 So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

***Returning to an assembly (64-67)***

*Assembled to simulate love and good deeds (Heb 10:23-25)*

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

*Assembled in the presence of God (Matt 18:20)*

20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

*Assembled for fellowship (Acts 2:42-47)*

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

*Assembled for prayer (Acts 1:14)*

14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

## Returning with an offering (68-70)

*Offering that is done willingly (2 Cor 8:12)*

12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

*Offering that is offered right (Gen 4:2-7)*

2 Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. 6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

*Offering that is given out of love (Eph 5:1-2)*

1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

*Offering that is sacrificial (Phil 4:16-18)*

16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. 17 Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

*Offering that is from a steadfast faith (2 Tim 4:6-8)*

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

## Conclusion and Other Thoughts

### ***Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh***

#### **The Decree of Cyrus: The First Wave of Exiles Return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4:24)**

The Assyrians chose to scatter their enemies, hoping to sever them from all their ties to their land and their religion. The Babylonians made captives of their enemies, using them as slaves (as we see with Daniel and his friends). God then fulfilled His promise to bring judgment upon the Babylonians ([Isaiah 13](#); [Jeremiah 25:12](#); chapters 50-51). The Persians who defeated them dealt with their prisoners of war in a very different way. They sought to instill gratitude in their captives, rather than hatred. They sent their captives back to their homeland and helped them re-establish their worship. And so it was that God orchestrated the events of human history in such a way as to fulfill His promise, made nearly 200 years beforehand, that a man named Cyrus would act as His servant, bringing the Jewish exiles in Babylon back to the Promised Land (see [Isaiah 44:26–45:1](#)).

It is interesting that our author does not choose to emphasize the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, but rather the prophecy of Jeremiah:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, **in order to fulfill the Lord's message spoken through Jeremiah**, the Lord stirred the mind of King Cyrus of Persia. He disseminated a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, announcing in a written edict the following ([Ezra 1:1](#), emphasis mine).

I believe we may safely assume that the prophecies of Jeremiah that were fulfilled by Cyrus would be those of [Jeremiah 25:12](#) and 29:10-14.

There is yet another prophecy of Jeremiah that was fulfilled by the decree of Cyrus:

21 "Indeed, the Lord God of Israel who rules over all has already spoken about the valuable articles that are left in the Lord's temple, in the royal palace of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 22 He has said, "They will be carried off to

Babylon. They will remain there until it is time for me to show consideration for them again. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.’ The Lord affirm this” (Jeremiah 27:21-22).

Cyrus included a command to return the vessels removed from the temple in Jerusalem, which had been kept in Babylon. The text makes it very clear that it was God who moved in the heart of Cyrus (1:1) and in the hearts of the 50,000 (1:5). God was sovereignly working to fulfill His purposes and promises regarding His people.

In Ezra 2, we are provided with a list of those “**whose spirits God stirred**” (Ezra 1:5), prompting them to go back to their homeland. We should not minimize the courage and faith of those who chose to return. We know that some of those who made this trek were elderly (see 3:12). The trip was approximately 800 miles, taking several months (see 7:8-9). There were grave dangers involved in such a journey, especially for a group carrying many valuable objects with them (1:66-69; compare 8:21-23, 31). Life was not so bad in Persia, and many of the Jews seem to have been content to remain there, as did Esther and Mordecai (the Book of Esther).

When the people arrived they assembled in Jerusalem, where they promptly constructed an altar and began to offer sacrifices. Their motivation includes fear of their enemies:

1 When the seventh month arrived and the Israelites were living in their towns, the people assembled in Jerusalem. 2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his priestly colleagues and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his colleagues started to build the altar of the God of Israel so they could offer burnt offerings on it as required by the law of Moses the man of God. 3 They established the altar on its foundations, **for they were in terror of the local peoples**, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and the evening offerings (Ezra 3:1-3, emphasis mine).

The exiles’ concerns regarding the “local peoples” were not unfounded. When the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, they transplanted these Israelites far from their homeland. The Assyrians then brought in other subjected peoples. We know that these people began to worship the God of Israel, in addition to their own gods (see 2 Kings 17:24-33). When the Babylonians defeated the people of Judah and sacked Jerusalem, the land was left to only a few of the poor. As we might expect, surrounding peoples began to “possess” the vacated land. They were not at all happy to learn that the Jews had returned to repossess their land and to permanently settle there. These Samaritan-like peoples were not willing to give up the land they had occupied without opposition. The decree of Cyrus made any opposition illegal, but then the Persian king was a long way away.

In the second year of the exiles’ return, they began to rebuild the temple. This began with the laying of the foundation of the temple (3:9). When the builders completed laying the foundation of the temple, there was a great celebration. There was the music of trumpets and cymbals, along with joyful singing. There was something strange about this “celebration,” however:

11 With antiphonal response they sang, praising and glorifying the Lord:

“For he is good; his loving kindness toward Israel is forever.”

All the people gave a loud shout as they praised the Lord when the temple of the Lord was established. 12 Many of the priests, the Levites, and the leaders—older people who had seen with their own eyes the former temple while it was still established—were weeping loudly, and many others raised their voice in a joyous shout. 13 People were unable to tell the difference between the sound of joyous shouting and the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people were shouting so loudly that the sound was heard a long way off (Ezra 3:11-13).

It was the older generation who was weeping loudly, while the younger generation was jubilant. Why? Because the older generation was living in the past; they were re-living “the good old days.” These folks could remember the temple in Jerusalem. How much more beautiful it was than what the reconstructed temple would look like. This living in the past and weeping was wrong. It is at the prompting of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, that the temple will be completed. When the temple is completed and the people celebrate, there are no tears. Why? I believe it is because the prophets corrected the error of their thinking.

Think about it for a moment. These older men could only have seen the temple in its last days, just before its destruction. These older men would have been quite young when they last saw the temple. No doubt they were overly impressed with its appearance, just as our Lord’s disciples were awe-struck by the beauty of Herod’s temple:

Now as Jesus was going out of the temple courts, one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher, look at these tremendous stones and buildings!” (Mark 13:1)

We know that in its last days, temple worship had been greatly corrupted. Images of other gods were there (see [2 Chronicles 33:1-9](#), [22](#); [36:14-21](#)). What, then, was so “good” about the “good old days”? I think the only thing one can say was “good” was that it was a beautiful building.

The fears of all (3:3) and the tears of some (3:12-13) were the first evidences of failure among those exiles who returned to their land. Chapter 4 further unfolds the sequence of events leading to the cessation of their efforts to rebuild the temple.

One must be very alert here to the chronological indicators in the text. A careless reading of the text could allow one to reach this conclusion:

The “peoples of the land” hear that the Jews are rebuilding the temple and offer their assistance. They, too, worship the God of Israel. The Jews know that if these peoples worship the God of Israel, it is only as one of many gods, rather than as the one true God. And so the Jews refuse to be “unequally yoked”<sup>334</sup> with these unbelievers in the work of rebuilding the temple. Their neighbors then set out to oppose this rebuilding project. As a part of their resistance they send a letter to King Artaxerxes, accusing the Jews of rebuilding the temple and the city so they can once again rebel against their captors, as they have done throughout their history. When Artaxerxes looks into this matter, he discovers that the Jews of Jerusalem and Judah have a history of rebellion, and so the king issues an order for the Jews to cease their rebuilding project. The peoples of the land then march against Jerusalem, threatening to go to battle against them if they do not stop rebuilding immediately. After Haggai and Zechariah begin to prophesy, the Jews once again commence the rebuilding of the temple, even though it is against the specific orders of Artaxerxes.

There are several problems with the (false) view articulated above. *First, King Artaxerxes reigned from 464 through 424 B.C., during the days of Ezra ([Ezra 7:1ff.](#)) and Nehemiah ([Nehemiah 2:1ff.](#)), while the events of [Ezra 4:1-5](#) take place somewhere around 536 B.C. Second, the Jews would have had to commence rebuilding the temple against the orders of the king. Throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is with the blessing of the kings of Persia that the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple take place. Third, the letter sent to Artaxerxes does not specifically mention rebuilding the temple, but rather the rebuilding of the city and its walls (see [4:12-13](#)). Fourth (and in my mind, most compelling), the prophet Haggai rebuked the Jews for a very different reason than that of [Ezra 4:6-23](#):*

1 On the first day of the sixth month of King Darius’s second year, the Lord spoke this message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak: 2 The sovereign Lord says this: **“These people have said, ‘The time for rebuilding the Lord’s temple has not yet come.’”** 3 So the Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai as follows: 4 **“Is it right for you to live in paneled houses while my temple is in ruins?”** ([Haggai 1:1-4](#), emphasis mine)

The Jews are rebuked for placing their own construction projects above the rebuilding of the temple. That’s a far cry from obeying the king’s decree and ceasing construction because they would be killed otherwise.

The solution to these problems is found in the details provided in [Ezra 4](#). In [Ezra 4:1-5](#), we are told that early on the peoples of the land sought to participate in the rebuilding of the temple and that their offer was flatly rejected. We then read that they set out to resist or hinder the Jews’ reconstruction efforts. This they did by intimidation and various other hindrances. We must remember that during the days of Cyrus and Darius those who opposed the Jews would have been in violation of the king’s decree and subject to severe punishment (see [Ezra 6:6-11](#)).

In verse 6, we are told that a complaint against the Jews was filed with Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus was the king of Persia during the events of the Book of Esther. No response by Ahasuerus is indicated. Verses 7-23 then reach out into the more distant future. The author seeks to show us that the hostility and opposition which commenced in [Ezra 3](#) and 4 grows more intense as time passes. While the people of the land could not use military force to stop the rebuilding of the temple during the days of Cyrus or Darius, they would do so in the days of Artaxerxes, with his (temporary)<sup>335</sup> permission.

Verse 24 then returns to the days of Zerubbabel, when opposition to the Jews’ work in Jerusalem was just in its initial stages. If we were reading the events of [Ezra 4](#) in chronological order, we would read verses 1-5, then verse 24, and finally verses 6-23 would need to be in parentheses, since they project us forward in time to a future period of opposition on the part of the people of the land.

There is an important point to all this detail. Construction of the temple seems to have halted only a few months after it was first begun. This was not because Cyrus ordered the Jews to stop building the temple, or even because the people of the land forced ([4:23](#)) them to stop. It was because the Jews were disheartened and discouraged, and distracted by their own interests. They were disheartened and discouraged because this new

temple was not going to be as glorious as the old one. It was not going to be an architectural masterpiece. They were discouraged because they faced a certain amount of opposition from the people of the land. We might say that the Jews were depressed. They turned their attention and their efforts toward building their own magnificent (paneled) homes. They became self-indulgent and self-absorbed. It is for their own sins that the prophet Haggai rebuked them.

The Jews had left Persia with much enthusiasm and zeal. No doubt they assumed that they would return to their land, quickly rebuild the temple and the city, and then turn their attention to their land and houses. When they found that completing the temple would not be as quick and easy as they had supposed (and that the temple was not as glorious as they had hoped, or remembered), they threw up their hands and turned their attention and energies to building their own homes. They did not give up on building the temple because it was forbidden by the king, or because the people of the land made it impossible. They gave up because the task was more difficult than they first thought, and because the temple did not seem as glorious as they had hoped. To turn their attention to their own homes was not that difficult (they really wanted to build their own homes anyway), and it did not seem to provoke the people of the land. It appeared safer and easier to put off work in Jerusalem, and it was really what they preferred anyway. How little it takes to cause God's people to stumble (see Song of Solomon 2:15).

I am reminded of the words of the writer to the Hebrews:

You have not yet resisted to the point of bloodshed in your struggle against sin ([Hebrews 12:4](#)).

That is the point, I believe, of the parenthetical inclusion of 4:6-23. Are the Jews ready to “throw in the towel” and give up rebuilding the temple? They have not come up against an immovable object; they have encountered a little resistance. They have the assurance of God, the decree of the king, and the means provided to accomplish their task. If they faced the circumstances of verses 6-23 they could claim substantial opposition, but this is not the case. Verses 6-23 are placed here, I believe, to contrast the puny difficulties of this time to the major obstacles of a later day. No wonder these folks are rebuked by Haggai (see chapter 1).

*(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/22-return-promised-land-ezra>)*

### **Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

After a 2019 fire destroyed parts of the cathedral of Notre-Dame, an international competition redesigned the building's destroyed rooftop and spiral. Architects had to keep in mind a variety of concerns: rebuilding costs, the cathedral's history, and the relationship between the cathedral and the city. Similar concerns are present in the narrative surrounding the return of Jewish exiles to their homeland. This week's lesson speaks of the exiles' history, their promised return, their relationships, and even their economic needs. While their return could have been disastrous, God provided direction through a decree of Persia's King Cyrus. Modern readers of Ezra may face major rebuilding efforts. These may be physical buildings, like a house, business, or church. However, the rebuilding effort may be less tangible, like relationships. These rebuilding projects invite the participants to envision a new reality, something wholly different from what was before. In those moments, we have to be available for God's provision and work.

## ***Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary***

God Is Faithful - In 538 B.C., around 50,000 Jewish exiles left Babylon and headed home to Judah, a trip of 1,000 miles over four months. They committed themselves to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Isaiah and Jeremiah had prophesied Judah's downfall and promised God would allow them to be delivered. After 70 years in captivity, under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Sheshbazzar), the group returned to the city's ruins with God's promise of re-establishment and His blessings. The nation had failed God, but God never forgot His people.

The Lord had raised up a Persian king named Cyrus who conquered Babylon and then allowed the captive Jews to go and rebuild their land. King Cyrus generously gave the remnant funds, wealth, and protection, and he also returned over 5,000 valuable artifacts stolen from Solomon's temple. The Jews remaining in Babylon also contributed to the remnant who returned.

The Remnant - In several places in the Book of Ezra, families are listed. Many of the old records had been lost or destroyed. Ezra and the other historical writers needed to list the names and count the numbers of those who left Babylon. The congregation included heads of households and their families. The crowd also included priests, servants, and the singers for festive occasions. When the crowd reached Jerusalem, the families contributed generously to the temple building project. Their offerings might have also been a way to express their thanksgiving to God for allowing them to make the long trip home.

God is in the Reconstruction Business - The Lord has allowed Christians to realize their freedom and deliverance from the bondage of sin. Their salvation is now secure. But when some individuals look at their lives, like the remnant returning from Babylon, they see only ruins, a life in complete destruction and disarray. However, those returning from their captors to rebuild depended on God for His plan and provisions to reestablish their land.

The Father's children can still do the same. A shame-filled, broken human being cannot reconstruct his own life. It's beyond human capabilities. But like the remnant, that person can surely place their trust in a God who is able to do more than they could ever think or imagine.