

In our last lesson, we talked about Daniel. The other governors tricked King Darius into signing a decree that caused Daniel to be thrown into the lion's den. God protected Daniel and closed the mouths of the lions.

In our study today, we will talk about the first group of people to return to Jerusalem. The kingdom of Judah was taken captive to Babylon. The Jews had been in captivity for 70 years.

There was a new ruler named Cyrus who was the king of Persia. (Ezra 1:1) King Cyrus made a decree that said the Jews could return to Jerusalem. The decree told the people they could rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Some of the Jews did not want to go back. They had been in Babylon so long they wanted to stay there.

King Cyrus was not a Jew like the people he was allowing to go home to Jerusalem. King Cyrus was a Gentile. King Cyrus was serving God by helping God's people. Remember that God had sent prophets to tell the people what would happen. The prophet Isaiah had said a man name Cyrus would rebuild the temple. (Isaiah 44:28-45) The prophet Jeremiah had said the people of Jerusalem would be in captivity for 70 years. (Jer. 29:10-11) Everything was happening just as God had told them.

The decree gave orders to those who were not returning to Jerusalem. The decree told the people to help those who were returning to Jerusalem. They were told to help by giving them silver and gold and things to help them to get started again. (Ezra 1:4)

King Cyrus gave the people the things that had been taken out of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. (Ezra 1:7) They were allowed to take those things back to use in their worship in the temple. They were also given things they needed to rebuild the temple.

One of the men returning to Jerusalem was a great leader named Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was to be the political leader. He would serve as the governor of Judah. Jeshua traveled with them. He was the religious leader. He was to serve as the High Priest. Both Zerubbabel and Jeshua were men of God.

Zerubbabel led the large group of Jews to Jerusalem. There were more than 40,000 Jews who went back. The second chapter of Ezra lists all the people who returned to Jerusalem.

The people took all their belongings with them. They also took animals like donkeys, camels, sheep and rams. They made their journey back to Jerusalem.

Jeshua and Zerubbabel built an altar to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. (Ezra 3:2) There were people living in Jerusalem when the Jews returned. They did not want the Jews to come back. The Jews did not allow them to interfere with their worship to God. The Jews worshipped by offering sacrifices to God each morning and each evening. (Ezra 3:3) Jeshua and Zerubbabel honored God by the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Feast of the New Moons. These were feasts that had been commanded in the Law of Moses. (Ezra 3:4-5)

Remember that the temple had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar. All they had to worship God was the altar Jeshua and Zerubbabel had built. The people started the work to rebuild the temple of the Lord. (Ezra 3:8) After the builders finished the foundation of the temple, the priests stood in their places and praised God. (Ezra 3:10) Then all the people shouted.

The enemies of the Jews tried to discourage them so they would stop building the temple. (Ezra 4:4) The enemies caused so many problems that the Jews finally stopped their work. They did not work on the temple for about 15 years. Even when the Jews were trying to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, the enemies wrote to the new king of Persia to try and stop them.

God sent 2 prophets to encourage the Jews. These prophets were Haggai and Zechariah. (Ezra 5:1) Jeshua and Zerubbabel started working again on the temple. Haggai and Zechariah helped them with the work on the temple. (Ezra 5:2)

There was a governor name Tattenai who heard about the work on the temple. Tattenai wrote a letter to Darius, the new king of Persia. (Ezra 5:5) Tattenai said the people did not have a right to build the temple. He wanted the work to stop in Jerusalem. The Jews told them that King Cyrus had written a decree that gave them the right to work on the temple.

King Darius commanded that the people search for the decree that King Cyrus had written. (Ezra 6:1) King Darius found the decree written by King Cyrus. He told Tattenai to leave the Jews alone. King Darius even made Tattenai and his people pay taxes. That money was used to help finish the temple. (Ezra 6:8) King Darius said that anyone who tried to stop the work on the temple would be punished.

The Jews worked on the temple for four years. When they finished the temple, the people were very happy. The priests were put in their places and they had a celebration to dedicate the temple to the Lord. (Ezra 6:16) They offered sacrifices to the Lord.

The people worshipped the way God had commanded Moses in the Book of the Law. God was getting things ready to bring Jesus into the world to be the Savior for all people. It was still about 500 years before Jesus was going to be born.