

Return from Exile

Ezra, Nehemiah and the Call to Excellence

Part 1 – Beginnings. October 2, 2016

Do not despise the day of small beginnings when you see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. – Zechariah's vision from the Lord



Think of things that have small beginnings ... but big and significant endings: in nature, in families, in sports, in business, in adventures, in causes, in travels, etc. Why is it so hard to get started? What gets us going and keeps us going?

The Story

Read the book of Ezra Chapters 1-3.

Key event is God stirring the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to issue a decree allowing all the Jewish people throughout his kingdom to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. This occurred in 538 B.C. shortly after Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and became ruler of the Media-Persian Empire. See map below:



About 50,000 people go in the first wave under the leadership of Zerubbabel (civil leader) and Jeshua (High Priest). They first built an altar for worship, begin sacrificing and worshipping at the altar, then build the foundation for the new temple. The people who had never seen the old temple were excited; those who had seen the old temple that was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia in 586 B.C. (50 years earlier) were dismayed and wept aloud.

Other key events in Israel's history:

722 B.C. Assyria conquers northern 10 tribes despite warnings from Isaiah to repent

605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar first attacks southern tribes of Judah and takes captives, including Daniel. This assault on Judah continues despite warning from Jeremiah for the Israelites, and their leaders, to repent.

586 B.C. Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army

550 B.C. Cyrus rises to power in Persia

539 B.C. Cyrus conquers Babylon (also described in Daniel Chapter 5)

538 B.C. Cyrus issues decree

537 B.C. First wave arrive and altar rebuilt

536 B.C. Foundation laid for the rebuilt temple

The Flashbacks

Isaiah 44:28-45:13; Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10-14; Daniel 9:1-2

Read the passages listed above. All 3 of these prophets predicted the 70-year captivity of Israel which began approximately at 605 B.C. and ended shortly after Cyrus' decree when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem. Note that in the Jeremiah prophecies it is said God would not only restore the fortunes of Israel after 70 years, but that he also would discipline and judge Babylon, which he did through the Persians.

Isaiah wrote 200 years before Cyrus' decree. Jeremiah approximately 10 years after the first exiles were taken in 605 B.C. Daniel during the first year of Darius (the name given to Cyrus, or perhaps his field general was named Darius the Mede) in 538 B.C., probably just 2 years before the end of the 70-year captivity



What are the applications to us today?

Let God's **PROMISES** Stir You Up!

II Peter 1:3-4; Numbers 23:19

Consider the promises to Israel in Jeremiah 29 as well as the NT reference to God's excellencies and promises in II Peter. How much was/is God's part in fulfilling promises? How much was/is their part and our part to see those promises fulfilled?

Consider the passage in Numbers ... what are you doing to seek God's promises in your life?

Don't Despise the Day of **SMALL BEGINNINGS!**

Zechariah 4:6-10

Consider the prophecy of Zechariah about the rebuilding of the Temple that would take place under Zerubbabel.

How would it be accomplished? Who would get the glory? What is the significance of the plumb line?

What can/should we do so that we 'do not despise the day of small beginnings?' What small beginning steps of faith and obedience is God calling you to take now?



Next Week ... Part 2 – Opposition

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand."

In 538 B.C. God demonstrated His excellence by moving the heart of a pagan king to issue a decree for the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem from their 70-year captivity. This seminal event in Israel's history was predicted by the prophets Isaiah (200 years earlier) as well as Jeremiah just before the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the captivity. Amazing!!!

Not only did the Lord stir the heart of King Cyrus of Persia to issue that decree, He also CALLED His people to a higher level of EXCELLENCE in their everyday lives. Through Ezra, Nehemiah and other leaders God moved His chosen people to rebuild first the altar in Jerusalem, then the Temple and finally the wall around their city. More importantly, He called them to renew and sharpen their walk with God (moral excellence), their love and service to the Jewish community (ministry excellence) and the ways they expressed their faith to a Gentile and unbelieving world (missional excellence).

Though the events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah spanned more than 100 years and reflect a time in history and culture different than our own, we are convinced the stories and truths have GREAT and PRACTICAL application to us today!!