

Lesson 88 God Promises a Messiah.

Memory Verse: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

Scripture: Isaiah 44 & 45, Ezra 1

Last week, we learned how Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. This was a dark time for Israel, being led into captivity because they turned away from God.

However, Isaiah prophesied about a future king (Cyrus), calling him by name long before Cyrus was born, describing him as the Lord’s “anointed.”. Writing more than a century before the events, Isaiah predicted that a foreign king, Cyrus, would not only overthrow Babylon but also allow the Jewish people to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple allowing them to return home after living as captives in Babylon.

We know from Scripture and history that the prophecy was fulfilled; Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Cyrus not only allowed their return but also restored the vessels that had been taken from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 1:7-11). This decree was a fulfillment of the prophecy given in Isaiah 44 and 45. God’s sovereignty is displayed in how Cyrus, a Gentile king, was used as an instrument to fulfill His purposes for Israel.

It would take nearly 100 years for the restoration of Jerusalem to occur. The first group of exiles would return under the leadership of Zerubbabel around 538 BC. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, was appointed governor of Judah, and Ezra 2 provides a list of the returning exiles. Upon their return, the people immediately began rebuilding the altar and laid the foundation for the Temple (Ezra 3). However, opposition from local enemies delayed the construction for several years (Ezra 4).

During the reign of Darius I of Persia, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah would encourage the people to resume the building of the Temple (Ezra 5), and the Temple would finally be completed in 516 BC, 70 years after its destruction, fulfilling Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Ezra, a priest and scribe, would lead a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 458 BC, during the reign of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7). His mission would be to teach the Law of God and ensure its observance among the people.

Nehemiah, a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, would return to Jerusalem around 445 BC with permission to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah 2). Nehemiah’s leadership would help restore both the physical and spiritual state of the Jewish community.

Before the captives were led away to Babylon, God had promised a restoration of a “remnant” after 70 years of captivity. The Jewish word ‘messiah’ literally means ‘anointed one.’ Cyrus was God’s messiah (lower-case; Jesus is the ultimate MESSIAH) for that purpose.

However, in addition to promising a return from captivity, God also instructed the exiles to be faithful while living IN Babylon during their time in exile. They were encouraged to settle down and make a home in Babylon, not merely endure their situation. They were instructed to marry, have children, and continue to grow as a community, not to diminish in number. And they were instructed to pray for the prosperity and peace of Babylon, for their well-being was tied to the welfare of the city. (Jer. 29:4-7).

The next few lessons will teach us about their time in captivity, while they were waiting to return to Jerusalem, yet also remembering to live for God’s Glory..