

Lesson 96: The Return

Scripture: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi

Memory Verse: “But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.” Malachi 4:2

God punished Israel for their rebellion by sending nations to carry away His people into captivity. Yet even in punishment that all deserved (Isaiah 5), God graciously and mercifully preserved a remnant (a portion). And after 70 years of exile, God began the process of restoring His people. In part, it consisted of allowing some to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. However, God’s restoration wasn’t just focused on returning to a place, His restoration had a lot more to do with His continued pursuit of people’s heart regardless of who they were and where they lived. This is the story of how God restored His people from captivity fulfilling His promise to never leave them or forsake them, and also protecting them from opposition from their enemies and also their own hearts.

God ended the 70 years of Jewish captivity in Babylon, by allowing king Cyrus of Persia to defeat Babylon. Then God stirred Cyrus to issue a proclamation that went out to all of his kingdom which said: “The LORD, the God of heaven, who made me king of the greatest kingdom on earth, has charged me to build a house for Him at Jerusalem. Let the Jews who are spread throughout my kingdom return to Jerusalem with all the supplies they need to rebuild the Temple.” By doing this, Cyrus fulfilled a prophesy God spoke through Isaiah 400 years earlier to restore His city, and free His people (Isaiah 45). Over 40,000 Jews returned to Israel to begin the work of rebuilding the temple.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, the first thing they did was to construct an altar and offer sacrifices to the Lord to openly worship Him and thank Him for His mercy. Then, after construction of the foundation of the temple, the Jews stopped work because of opposition from enemies. And they also stopped because in their own hearts, they decided it would be more important to build houses for themselves instead than work on God’s house. But God sent Haggai the prophet to call His people back, and he used King Darius (a Persian king who came after Cyrus) to provide protection from their enemies so that construction of the Temple could be completed.

Not all the captives returned to Jerusalem. Some had remained settled in the cities of their captivity. And God provided for them as well. At one point an evil man named Haman, who hated the Jews, made a plot to have them all destroyed. And while Haman was scheming to destroy the Jews, God was actively protecting them. He did so by exposing Haman’s evil plot to a faithful man named Mordecai who was the uncle of a young Jewish girl named Esther who became queen of Persia! With Mordecai’s encouragement, Esther bravely revealed to her husband, king Xerxes her true identity as a Jew, and Haman’s evil plot to destroy her people. In this way, God brought glory to Himself as He used Mordecai and Esther as agents of His provision and protection for His people.

The final chapter of the restoration of the remnant of Israel happened during the reign of Persian king Artaxerxes, Nehemiah set out with a group of exiles to rebuild the wall and gate to the city of Jerusalem. The wall serves to set the city apart from the surrounding people, and to protect them from enemies. Once again, the Jews faced opposition, but God showed he was on their side by providing protection again and again. This is a picture of God desiring to create a people set apart for Him, and His ability to provide and protect.

So, God’s temple and the city of Jerusalem were restored. All this happened by God’s leading; it was a plan that had been set in place even before the Jews were taken into captivity. AND it was a plan God carried out despite the ongoing sin of the people. For example, many of the returning captives had married foreign wives, and began following their false ways. But God even had a plan for that; through his leaders and prophets, he revealed to His people their sinful ways, and they confessed and repented of their sins.

So, is this the end of the story of the people of Israel? How can it be? Many are still living scattered away from their homeland, and despite repentance, the people were still prone to fall back into sinful ways. Thankfully, God’s plan was still unfolding. Time was drawing nearer to the time when God would do His great work of ultimate restoration by sending a leader who would provide salvation from sin for ALL time. In fact, during this time of restoration, God spoke to His people through His prophet Zechariah, who prophesied that despite their guilt, He would send one called the Branch (ch. 6) to bring salvation to the world as God who is pierced (ch. 12) to open up a fountain to cleanse people from sin and uncleanness (ch 13). And God also spoke through his prophet Malachi to warn of God’s destruction of evildoers who will experience God as burning furnace, but to provide hope to those who put their faith in Jesus who will experience God’s radiance as the “Sun of Righteousness” that will rise and bring healing in its wings!