**LESSON 20 - THE RESTORATION**

**Background:**

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover the last century of O.T. Jewish history, roughly 538-433 B.C. Ezra continues the historical account following Chronicles, which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the people being taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

During this time Daniel interprets the handwriting on the wall to King Belshazzar Nebuchadnezzar’s son), which told how Cyrus, king of Persia would take over his kingdom (Dan. 5). That night Darius (appointed to reign by Cyrus) invaded, Belshazzar was slain and the Babylonian kingdom was conquered by the Persians. Soon afte Cyrus gives the edict for the Jews to return to their homeland.

Ezra and Nehemiah describe the three stage return:

* The first and main party, who returned with Zerubbabel (of the line of David and heir to the throne in 538-537
* The party that returned with Ezra 80 years later in 458 (date still in question)
* Nehemiah's party in 445.

Esther's story takes place in the time between the first return/the building of the temple, and Ezra's return (Ezra 7:1).

Ezra and Nehemiah span the reigns of five Persian kings.

1. **Exile in Babylon**

* Duration: The exile was to last 70 years (Jer. 25:12; 29:10).
* Daniel, in his prayer (Dan 9) reminds God of his promise and prays for its fulfillment.
* Isaiah names the man (Cyrus) who will be used by God to restore Israel (Isa. 44:24-45:7) 150 years in advance.

1. **Life in Babylon:** The exiles were moved to Babylon itself, lived in towns and villages as well as the capital city. They were free to establish themselves as part of the community, to maintain their own customs, and to practice their religion as they wanted.

It was during the exile, when worship at Jerusalem was impossible, that the synagogue arose as a place for instruction in the Scriptures, and prayer. It served as a substitute for the temple, though there was no altar and no sacrifice.

The importance of the synagogue cannot be overestimated. More than any other institution it gave character to the Jewish faith, particularly during the years of exile. It was located in all parts of the land and brought people in touch with their religious leaders. It also performed an important social function. It was a gathering place, a meeting point where community affairs could be discussed as well. It secured the continuation, even strengthening of Judaism in a foreign land, and established the foundation for a religious community of universal scope.

1. **End of the exile:** In 539 BC Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians and allowed the nations who had been displaced to return to their lands, including the Jews (Ezra 1:8). The grandson of king Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel, led the return of the exiles. (There is a brief reference to Prince Sheshbazzar in Ezra 1:8 as the one to whom Cyrus gave the temple vessels, but he is not mentioned again. He may have been Zerubbabel’s uncle, or the same person – both were princes of Judah, and both are referenced as laying the foundations of the temple). Messianic hope was related to Zerubbabel’s leadership as the one restoring Israel to the Promised Land, and establishing the throne and Kingdom of David once again:

*“‘On that day, says the Lord of Hosts, I will take you Zerubbabel, son of* [*Shealtiel*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shealtiel)*, my servant, and wear you like a* [*signet ring*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signet_ring)*; for it is you whom I have chosen. This is the word of the Lord of Hosts’” (Hag. 2:23)*

Only a small group, about 42,000 from Judah, Benjamin, Levi returned. Note that they were sent out with the wealth of their neighbours, reminiscent of the Exodus. They were allowed to bring back the sacred things from the temple.

Once again we see those who are spiritually sensitive responding to God’s calling with obedience, and those who become comfortable with what is and do not participate in his purposes.

The first order of business was to rebuild the temple. They were completely frustrated in their efforts by Samaritans who came to offer "help," and when repulsed, harassed them so that work was halted. These were Jews who had been left behind, who intermarried with non-Jews.

Samaria had been the capital city of Israel until the Assyrians overran it. The Assyrians moved in people from Mesopotamia and Aram. These people served their own gods, but also incorporated worship of Yahweh as the God of the land. Therefore they were not considered "pure" enough to be involved in the reconstruction of the holy temple. (Separation concept)

They complained to King Xerxes (Ahasuerus), but nothing is said in Ezra about his response; another complaint sent to King Artaxerxes resulted in him ordering work stopped.

After some time, Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets, encouraged work to begin again. This time efforts to get the work stopped by writing to Darius has the opposite effect, and he orders the people of the area to pay for the reconstruction (Ezra 6:6-10). The temple is rebuilt from 519-515. When complete, the Temple is dedicated and the Passover celebrated again.

1. **Second and third returns of exiles:**

* During the time between the first and second return, Israel barely survived. The Hebrew language started petering out during this period, wasn't really revived until the Zionist movement began 20th century). From 500 BC-1900 A.D. Aramaic (a Semitic language) took over (Neh 13:24 Daniel was written in both Hebrew and Aramaic.)
* There was nothing left of Israel - no cities, no agriculture. The people inhabiting the land were hostile. The returning exiles were starting over in rebuilding, so while there was rejoicing in their return home, there was also much sorrow and huge obstacles to overcome.
* Nearly 60 years transpire between the end of Ezra 6 (1st return) and the beginning of Ch. 7 (2nd return, when the dedication of the temple took place, and Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem.)
* During this time the events of Esther take place. She averts the near extermination of the Jews living in Babylon, and probably because of those events, Artexerxes is favourably disposed towards the Jews. He sends Ezra off with generous gifts to fully reinstitute worship of God in the temple (457 B.C.) About 1700 people including priests and Levites return with him.
* The third group of exiles return with Nehemiah in 445 BC, also during the reign of Artexerxes. His main goal is to see the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt (He accomplishes it in 2 months despite fierce opposition, another sign of God's hand at work.)

This period was ***true*** restoration, a restoration not only of physical Israel, but reform of the law in particular. Even so, religious reform was necessary:

* Mal. 1:6-14: There was low respect for religious traditions
* Neh. 13:15-22: Sabbath reform was needed
* Neh13:23-31: Intermarriage with non-Jews was taking place (remember Solomon fell into idolatry because of intermarriage with heathen women)
* Ezra 9:10-10:17 also deals with the issue of intermarriage.

There is always need for spiritual renewal, and revitalising religious forms. The Reformed Church (our home denomination) theme is “continually reforming according to the Word of God”

We see the necessity of renewing the commitment to separation. Whenever there is a return to separation concept there is also danger of losing missionary focus. The same tension exists for us today. Many passages remind Israel of her destiny, such as Isa. 42:6-7, 49:6, Ps. 67

**Questions:**

1. What gives a religion the power to win converts?
2. What are the conditions for having such power?
3. What can we learn from Israel's failure?

The nation of Israel was to be a case study of God in the midst of His people. Separation was not to be a goal for eternity, but a means to an end, so other peoples might see God uniquely living his transformational life in them (Christians today are in a different situation, we are not a nation set apart, but individuals/communities scattered throughout the world.)

If the nation had been a place where justice and righteousness were known, many others would have seen what it meant to be in relationship with God and would have come to desire the same relationship.

**Discuss: What went wrong?**

1. Made ends out of means
2. Kept religious rituals but not in the right spirit traditions became legalistic.
3. Kept laws to earn favour with God, a “works righteousness,” giving them a feeling of superiority.
4. Mixed worship of true God with other gods – syncretism, idolatry
5. Lack of morality - lack of relationship with God affects our whole life, our relationships with others.

When righteousness and justice are missing, people are not drawn to God – how could they be? There is nothing that makes us distinct from the world. The character of God when seen in people draws others – it is what we long for. Failure to be a blessing was at least in part because of lack of ***relationship*** with God, resulting in failure to lead godly lives.

**Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi** were Prophets of the Restoration

1. **Haggai**: a Rabbi, teacher (Pharisees, Sadducees were the rabbis of Israel)

**Ch. 2:11-14** is the logical argument of a teacher, rather than the "Thus saith the Lord" of the prophet. He was probably a young man at the time of the return of the exiles.

The messages of Haggai were given within a four month period (520).

His message addresses the inactivity of the Jews re: rebuilding the temple. It seems it had more to do with their own lethargy than their opponents, so Haggai tries to rouse them.

1. **Zechariah** not only shared Haggai’s burden about the inertia of the postexilic community, but by vision and dream saw the unfolding of God’s divine purpose for all of God’s people and for all the ages to come. His writing is filled with apocalyptic imagery points ahead to the messiah with many predictions and allusions. Full of hope for the future fulfillment of the purposes of God, not only in the coming of the Messiah, but the mission of Israel as well in bringing the message to the nations.
2. **Malachi:** The burden of this, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was the glaring inconsistency between the identity of the Jewish community as the people of God and the living out of all that this required of them. The Temple and city have been rebuilt but the issue of righteousness, justice and worship continue to plague the restored nation. Malachi was the last prophet to speak before the coming of the Messiah - the next four hundred years are a period of silence.

Israel waits for the Messiah, clinging to the promises through centuries of silence.