

CHAPTER 19, THE RETURN HOME

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S GRACE PROVIDES A FRESH START.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

After generations of idolatry, God's people had been defeated by the empires that controlled the ancient world. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom, deported the people, and re-populated the land with exiles from other countries. Their practice was to redistribute people from conquered nations throughout their vast empire. The foreigners who were resettled in northern Israel intermarried with the few remaining Jews and became the half-breed Samaritans.

The Babylonians were next on the world scene. After each of their three conquests of the Southern Kingdom, the Babylonians deported Jewish captives to enclaves in Babylon and sought to assimilate them into their culture. Now, 70 years of captivity had elapsed. Kings and kingdoms rise and fall; world empires come and go.

The next world power, Persia, was more benevolent. They preferred the benefits of high taxation and the favor of the various gods. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. And thus the people of Israel began their journey home.

Under the guidance of the Hebrew leader, Zerubbabel, nearly 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. They were intent on rebuilding, and the temple was the first priority. They rebuilt the altar and prepared sacrifices in accordance with the Law of Moses. Fifty years had passed since the temple had been torn down by the Babylonians, and at last God's people were again able to worship as God had instructed. The foundation of this humble temple could not compare to the magnificence of its predecessor, but the process had begun, and God was leading the way.

The locals didn't necessarily roll out the welcome wagon for the repatriated Judeans. They made a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to sabotage the temple rebuilding project. Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, but the Jews were intimidated and construction halted.

Sixteen years later the prophet, Haggai, spoke on God's behalf. He twice urged his people, "Give careful thought to your ways." He reminded them that the temple had to be built as a place of honor and glory for God. The LORD encouraged His people and they returned to their work. Though the new temple would not have the splendor of the old one, God promised that His unsurpassed glory would return. Zechariah agreed; Jerusalem would again teem with life and prosperity because the people would live righteously. God promised to shower Jerusalem and Judah with His goodness and make Israel a blessing to the world.

When the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius hoping to obstruct progress. Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had given his royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of God's temple. In a fitting twist of events, Darius penned a letter back to Tattenai charging him with responsibility for funding the temple reconstruction. The plot backfired, and in 516 B.C., the temple was completed.

It had been 70 years since the people were first taken captive. This long and painful season of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. In the Lower Story, God brought them out of captivity again. He returned them to the Land of Promise where they rebuilt His temple and their lives.

But the Upper Story once again rings with echoes of delivery from bondage. The LORD had redeemed His people from foreign captivity as God's great, over-arching plan continued unabated. This story of liberation and restoration is a poignant reminder that this world is not our home. Like Israel, we wait in joyful anticipation of our journey to a land of eternal promise (Heb. 11:16) where all things are new and home will be forever.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the farthest you have moved? How was the adjustment?

1. How did the LORD fulfill His word spoken by Jeremiah? Look up Jer. 25:12 and 29:10. What happened to the king of Babylon? (See p. 256-257 for further insight.)
2. Look up Isa. 44:28 - 45:1. About how many years had passed between Isaiah's prophecy and Cyrus' edict? What does this teach you about God?
3. Why do you think many of the exiles chose to stay in Babylon instead of returning home to the Promised Land? How do you suppose God viewed that choice?
4. How did the temple builders and worshipers regard their covenant, the Law of Moses (p. 264-265)? Compare their view of the Law to the Israelites' attitude before the exile.
5. When the temple was re-established, some were overjoyed, and some were heart-broken. Many churches go through periods of growth, reconstruction and challenge. How should we respond when mixed feelings pull us in opposite directions?
6. What difficulties did the Jews experience in their rebuilding efforts? How did they respond to adversity? How can you use this story when facing adversity?
7. Zechariah's message claimed that people from other nations would be attracted to the religion and the God of the Jews (p. 269-270). What was to be the basis for this attraction? In what ways should our church be attractive to outsiders?
8. Once they resumed work on the temple, opposition resumed from Tattenai and others (p. 270). What examples of irony can you find in the correspondence between Tattenai and King Darius? What support do you find that "the eye of their God was watching over" them?
9. With Zechariah's encouragement, the people completed the task God gave them. Who in your group needs encouragement? Make a list of specific needs to pray for, and check on them next week.

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 20, THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Compare and contrast either Queens Vashti and Esther or Mordecai and Haman. Consider how their actions and words reveal their characters and synthesize your conclusions into a simple life lesson that applies to you today.
2. Mordecai seemed to have God's Upper Story in view when he sent word to Esther, "*And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?*" (p. 282). When has God most recently placed you in a position to serve a greater purpose than you desired? How did that make you feel?

DAY 2

1. How did Esther respond to Mordecai's instruction to approach the king and beg for mercy (p. 282)? Other than courage, what else was driving Esther's response?
2. Briefly list all that Haman boasted of to his wife and friends (p. 283). Why then was he not satisfied? What does this teach you about pride and discontentment?

DAY 3

1. The story of Esther demonstrates the need for fasting when facing a major crisis. Fasting is not an effort to "bribe" God into granting our request, but instead is done in reverence of His sovereignty and to focus our efforts. Have you ever fasted? What was the result?
2. A Medo-Persian king's edicts could not be repealed. How might your words or speech be different if you could not undo them? (See Matthew 5:37, James 3:1-11, James 5:12, and Ephesians 4:29.) What should characterize a Christian's words?
3. What was supposed to be a day of great destruction became a day of great deliverance and celebration of God's faithfulness. If you were to commemorate a time when God delivered you or providentially watched over you, what would it be and how would you celebrate it?