

## Sabbath School Lesson #1 – Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra – 28 Sep-4 Oct 2019

**C**hrist would have us make sense of the history of the salvation of men – “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,” and even among the nations plunged into idolatry, God has “left not Himself without witness.” When Egypt held Israel captive, God delivered Israel by manifesting His power and His glory in such a way that even the Canaanites heard of it and knew that the God that delivered Israel was the God of Heaven and earth (Joshua 2:9-11). When Assyria had gone far away from God, He sent a Hebrew prophet and called them to repentance (Jonah 1:2-3). He bore witness to Assyria that He is God above all, the most notable instance being the slaughter of the host of Sennacherib (Isaiah 37). Babylon spread her empire over all nations, and to them God left not Himself without witness. He bore witness directly to Nebuchadnezzar, in the dream of the great image, and its interpretation by Daniel, the captive Hebrew. When Nebuchadnezzar, after God warned him (Daniel 4:4-27), was driven out from the presence of men to run wild for seven years, he learned by it that Jehovah rules in the affairs of men, and that He is above all gods; and when the king recovered his understanding, he published “unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth,” that he “thought it good to show the signs and wonders that the high God” had wrought (verses 1-2). When Cyrus reigned, he also “made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of Heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (*He is the God*)” (Ezra 1:2).

Sunday: The First Return of the Exiles – Just as God had named a definite time when He would deliver His people from Egypt, so He named the exact time of the captivity of Israel in the city of Babylon (see Jeremiah 29:10-14). Exactly as in the first instance, so in the second, everything came to pass according to the Word of God. The captivity began in BC 606, and sixty-eight years later, in BC 538 the city of Babylon fell into the hands of the Medes and Persians (See Daniel 5). Of that time we read, “In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; in the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes” (Daniel 9:1-3). Here was at least one man seeking God with his whole heart. We do not know if there were others who sought the Lord as Daniel did, there were certainly not many, but God nevertheless fulfilled His part to the letter. Two years after Daniel’s prayer, in the year BC 536 just seventy years after the beginning of Israel’s captivity in the city of Babylon, Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a proclamation which is thus recorded: “Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (*He is God*), which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:1-4). The number that went to Jerusalem following this proclamation is set down as “forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, beside their servants and their maids, whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven; and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women” (Ezra 2:64-70).

Monday: Overview of Kings and Events – Most of the Persian kings, although noted for their cruelty, treated the Jews with great favour. An account of the dealings of the Persian

kings with the Jews is found in the books of Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra. Also the prophets Haggai and Zechariah uttered their prophecies after the return from the captivity, but before the complete restoration. We learn from the book of Ezra that the people of God who at the command of Cyrus went up from Babylon to Jerusalem to build the temple, became much discouraged on account of the opposition brought to bear against them, and abandoned the work for several years. Added to this opposition was a severe drought, which cut off their crops, depriving them of even the necessaries of life. Of course under the circumstances they could not be expected to give time and means for the building of the temple, and they very naturally concluded that the time had not come for the Lord's house to be built (Haggai 1:2); for, they doubtless reasoned, 'if the Lord wanted his house built now, he would give us the means with which to do it.' "Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:3-6). Then the Lord gives the cause of this terrible want: "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of Mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land" (verses 9-11). Read also chapter 2:11-19.

In this instance the people thought that the hard times was a sufficient reason for not building the temple, when the hard times came solely because they had not gone ahead with the work of building. The Lord now promised them that from this time he would bless them, if they would take hold of the work; and to assure them of His ability to give and to withhold prosperity, and also of His right to receive homage, He said, "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord of hosts." Paul said in regard to the subject of giving, "But this I say, he that soweth sparingly shall reap all so sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall read also bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). There are many who have proved the truth of this, and who know that it pays to take God into all their calculations, and in all their ways to acknowledge Him; for, as Paul continues, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (verse 8).

Tuesday: The Second Return of the Exiles – The first permission by Cyrus for the exiles to return was unlimited, but not all of any tribe took advantage of it. All the tribes, however, were represented. In the second return, Artaxerxes in his commission to Ezra wrote: "I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of His priests and Levites in my realm, which are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee" (Ezra 7:13).

Wednesday: Artaxerxes' Decree – The going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem, was in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, or 457 BC (see the seventh chapter of Ezra). There had been decrees concerning Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-4; 5:1-15), but this is the only one that contemplated the complete restoration of Jerusalem, and consequently it is the one that apply to the time prophecy of Daniel 9:25. From the date of this decree, until the Messiah, was to be seven weeks and three-score and two weeks, that is sixty-nine weeks, or four hundred and eighty-three days. Of course this did not mean that the Messiah should come in a little over a year from that time; but the prophecy concerning the days is one in which nations are represented by symbols (see Daniel 8:1-14), and the days must therefore be symbolic. In a prophecy recorded in Ezekiel 4:6, we learn that a prophetic day is a literal year. Therefore Daniel 9:25 is equivalent to the statement that four hundred and eighty-three years from the decree of Artaxerxes (BC 457), Messiah the Prince should come.

Thursday: Importance of Education – Ezra had the education of the world, but humbled himself to unlearn them and learn God's ways. So it is with us today: "It is necessary that our unity today be of a character that will bear the test of trial.... We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and Heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed" {CET 203.2}.