

Explore the Bible Series for December 3: Seize the opportunities God provides

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Seize the opportunities God provides

- Ezra 1:1-6; 3:1-3, 10-11

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The Jews' return from Babylonian captivity seemed like a second exodus, sovereignly patterned in some ways after Israel's first redemption from Egyptian bondage. The book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus for the Jews to return to Jerusalem (circa 538 B.C.), and chronicles the reestablishment of Judah's national calendar of feasts and sacrifices, including the rebuilding of the second temple (begun in 536 B.C. and completed in 516 B.C.).

The people responded to the God-given opportunity to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple by going and by giving. Seven months after leaving the land of exile, the Israelites rebuilt the altar and restored the formal forms of worship given through Moses. When the people completed the temple's foundation, they gathered in a formal ceremony to praise God and give thanks to him.



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Respond to God-given opportunities (Ezra 1:1-6)

“Now” connects the book of Ezra to the last statement in 2 Chronicles. God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to proclaim an edict of deliverance for the Jewish people. This is the first year Cyrus had authority over Babylon and Judah (circa 538 B.C.). Cyrus ruled only a small region of the Median Empire (modern Iran) until 550 B.C. when he took control of the larger empire, later known as the Persian Empire. Under his effective leadership the empire expanded in all directions.

Cyrus waited for several years before moving against Babylon (modern Iraq). In 539 B.C., life in Babylon was so terrible and the king of Babylon so intensely disliked that when Cyrus entered the city to capture it, no one opposed him. From that point, the Persian Empire included all of what we now know as Syria and Israel, in addition to Iran.

Cyrus, who claimed to be king of the whole earth (v. 2), ordered the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and allowed displaced Judeans to return there (v. 3). He encouraged those Jews who did not return to offer financial support to those who did (v. 4). Cyrus was a polytheist who recognized every regional god. He did not affirm the ultimate sovereignty of the one true God—the Lord of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet, God chose to use Cyrus to accomplish his purposes. Through Cyrus, the Persian “messiah” (Isaiah 45:1), God began to restore Judah.

The “chief of the fathers” identifies the Jewish leaders (Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah) who responded to the call of Cyrus. “Judah and Benjamin” are the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom from which Nebuchadnezzar took exiles back to Babylon. The decree of Cyrus applies primarily to people from these tribes. “The priests and Levites” deserve specific mention because not only are they the religious leaders of Israel, but also a rebuilt temple could not function properly without priestly and Levitical personnel.

In verse 6, “all they who were about” the returning people “strengthened their hands with vessels of silver and gold.” “All” here is inclusive—the Jews who chose to stay in Babylon and the gentiles. The phrase “all that was willingly offered” refers to freewill offerings for the temple. A special offering is an opportunity to thank God for something unusual and flows from one's own free will. The tithe is required; therefore, we cannot have a free will offering without tithing first.

Recognize the priority of worship (Ezra 3:1-3)

By “the seventh month,” the people who had returned from Babylon were settled “in the cities” (v. 1). The seventh month, for Jews, signifies a season of intense holiness since it contains such major holidays as The Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. The people gathered together in Jerusalem with a common purpose, “as one man.”

In verse 2, “Jeshua the son of Jozadak” was the high priest, and his “brethren” also were “priests.” “Zerubbabel” was the governor of Judah. Both religious and civic leaders rose up to build “the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon.” They did this in obedience to the “law of Moses,” that had commanded the people to make sacrifices to God.

The rebuilt altar was positioned “upon his bases” the original foundations.

The rebuilt altar was placed exactly where the old one had been before the Babylonians destroyed it. An interval of decades stood between these people and the last time the Jews had sacrificed to God; however, the continuity of the temple mount in Jerusalem connected the new with the old.

A fear of neighboring peoples encouraged the Jews to focus on the priority of reestablishing their relationship with God. Restoring worship of God might ward off danger, because God's presence would protect the people. So the people began to offer "burnt offerings morning and evening" as prescribed in the Law (Exodus 29:38-46). These sacrifices would remind the people of God's daily presence with them.

Rejoice in the Lord's help (Ezra 3:10-11)

As soon as the builders completed the foundation, everyone stopped working to celebrate. Both the priests, arrayed "in their apparel," and the Levites who grabbed their cymbals, began to "praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel." The emphasis is on the continuity in Israel's worship between the past and the present.

The priests and Levites sang together, drawing "all the people" into worship. The song found in verse 11 can be found throughout the Psalms. It celebrates God's goodness and his covenant faithfulness towards Israel. In joyous song, the people gave credit to God for their progress in restoration—they worshipped "with a great shout."

If you are the recipient of God's help you should want to shout sometime. God is good and worthy to be praised.

Discussion question

- Can an opportunity that looks good be contrary to God's will?

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