

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
June 30, 2013

Coming Back to What Matters Most

Read Ezra 1:1-4 & 3:1-7

Key verses: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord....” (Ezra 1:2-3).

Keith Mannes shared this spiritual insight: “My wife’s aunt Gladys has always had a little apple orchard at her home. But this year when we paid her a visit, I couldn’t help but notice the huge harvest of apples. The branches hung heavy, and some were cracking with the weight of abundance. Never, in many years, had anyone seen such a harvest.

“When I asked her why, she told me that last year there was a late frost in the spring, and all the buds froze. When that happens, Gladys said, an apple tree does a miraculous thing: It stores up its energy in thousands of small bumps, or nodules, called *scions*. All that energy pulsates through that network of scions until the spring of the following year, and then, BAM! You have an exploding riot of buds, as an apple tree unleashes all that stored up energy.

“Gladys’ description made me think about our spiritual lives. Sometimes the harsh frosts of this life—cancer, divorce, bankruptcy, trauma, grief, depression—cause our hearts to freeze. But at the core of the Christian faith we also live with an incredible promise: in and through Christ, there will be an abundant harvest in our lives. God’s power is pulsating under the gnarly bark of this world and even our bodies. In Christ, we are being formed into a small nodule of living hope. During certain seasons of our life we feel our hearts waiting, longing, and even aching for those frozen places to burst into life. Our living hope is that one day all of this stored up glory will be unleashed in a joyful riot of splendor.”

During the dead and frozen seasons of our lives, we live in hope of the new life God will one day bring. It doesn’t always happen as quickly as we would like. For the captives of Israel, it took 70 long years....

Ezra 1:1-4 tells how God used King Cyrus of Persia to begin the return of God’s people to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple. Some 70 years earlier,

Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians, and many of the Jews had been carried into captivity.

Later, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians, King Cyrus came to power. He carried out a plan of placating his captors by allowing many of them to return to their homelands. By doing so, Cyrus hoped to win the loyalty of these subject peoples and to create buffer zones on the edges of his empire. King Cyrus might have seen this move primarily as a matter of political and military expediency. But the Jews saw God's mighty hand at work.

Jeremiah the prophet had prophesied a 70-year captivity (Jeremiah 25:11 & 29:10). Now, God was using Cyrus, a non-Jewish ruler, to accomplish his purpose and to fulfill his promise: "...in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia...." (Ezra 1:1).

Ezra 3:1-7 tells of the first group of exiles who returned to Jerusalem. One of the first things they did was to build an altar and begin their sacrificial worship of God. They believed that the Exile had been a result of their unfaithfulness to God. Now that they were returning, they wanted to make sure they did not repeat their mistakes. Sacrificial worship was essential because it demonstrated their commitment to put God first, to follow God's commands, to seek forgiveness of their sins, and to daily seek God's guidance and help.

What do these ancient verses from Ezra 1 and 3 mean for our lives today?

1. *God is always faithful to keep his promises.* Sometimes the wait can be excruciating. For the Jewish exiles, the wait meant living as strangers in a strange land. They must have wondered at times if God cared for them any longer. But after 70 long years, as God had promised, he led them back to their homeland. God is faithful, and God is always on time—not our time, but God's time.

2. *God's ability to help us is not limited by our own limited resources.* When the Jewish exiles had no ability to deliver themselves, God used a pagan king to deliver them! God can use anyone and anything to help us. In those times when we feel overwhelmed, outnumbered, and outmatched, remember that God's ability is not limited by our limited resources. God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

3. *"The main thing is to keep the main things the main things"* Even though they were surrounded and threatened by their enemies, the newly returned exiles "put first things first." They built an altar and restored the sacrificial system of worship. They had learned painfully that God's blessing, protection, and guidance are not often given to people who ignore him.

Still today, putting God first through our giving, our stewardship, and our worship brings God's blessing.

A man wrote a letter to the editor of this local newspaper, complaining that attending church was no longer worth it to him. He wrote, "I've gone for 30 years now, and in that time I've heard some 3000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So I've decided that I am wasting my time by going to church."

Another newspaper reader wrote his response: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. Yet, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me the strength needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me those meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

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