Lesson Text: Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70; Time of Action: About 538 B.C.; Place of Action: Babylon

Golden Text: “And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place.” (Ezra 2:68).

I. INTRODUCTION. After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, which was now part of the Persian Empire, God’s people were permitted to return to their homeland. Some 300 years before the Babylonian Captivity, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah declaring that God would cause Cyrus, the king of Persia to give the Jewish exiles the opportunity to return to their homeland (see Isaiah 44:28). Isaiah’s prophecy was now being fulfilled.

II. THE LESSON BACKGROUND. Ezra was a captive during the Babylonian Captivity. He was also a scribe (see Ezra 7:6, 12) and a priest (see Ezra 7:1-5). As a scribe, his duty was to copy, interpret and transmit the books of the Law. The Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians with a series of deportations to Babylon beginning in 605 B.C. The Captivity would last for 70 years (see Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10),
from 586 B.C. when the temple was destroyed, to about 516 B.C. when the returning exiles would rebuild it.  **Note: The 70 year Captivity period has been calculated in two different ways: (1) from the first deportation of Jews in 605 B.C. (see II Kings 24:1) until the altar was rebuilt by the returning exiles in 536 B.C. (see Ezra 3:1-6), and (2) from the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. until the exiles finished rebuilding it in 516 B.C. As a result of God’s providence, the Babylonians fell to the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C., and the first year of the Persian conqueror, Cyrus the Great, the LORD moved on his spirit to issue a decree allowing the Jews to return home (see Ezra 1:1-4).** It is believed that Cyrus may have been shown the prophecy of Isaiah 44:28-45:6 written over a century earlier, which predicted that Cyrus would help the Jews return to Jerusalem. The time for God’s people to return home had arrived just as Isaiah had prophesied. This is where our lesson begins with the first group of returning Jews.

**III. CYRUS’ DECREE (Ezra 1:1-4)**

**A. Fulfillment of prophecy (Ezra 1:1).** Our first verse says “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...” The phrase “the first year of Cyrus king of Persia” does not refer to “the first year” of his reign over Persia, the kingdom he was born to, but to “the first year” of his reign over Babylon, the kingdom he had conquered in 538 B.C. It was in that year “that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.” Jeremiah had prophesied seventy years of captivity in Babylon (see Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10) even before Cyrus was born (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). The LORD was sovereignly bringing to pass “the word” He had spoken through “Jeremiah” over a century earlier. The prophecy came to pass when “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.” In the words of Proverbs 21:1, the LORD directed Cyrus’s “heart” like “the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.” Not only did “Cyrus” issue a verbal “proclamation,” by sending a voice throughout his entire kingdom, he “put it also in writing” so that it would be sent to those distant provinces where the ten tribes were scattered in Assyria and Medes (see II Kings 17:6). We are told what the “proclamation” said in verses 2-4. Note: It has been said of “Cyrus” that he didn’t know God or how to serve Him; but God knew “Cyrus” and how to serve Himself by him (see Isaiah 45:1, 4). God governs the world by his influence on the “spirits” of men, and whatever good they do at any time, it is God who “stirs up the spirit” to do it. He puts thoughts into the mind and directs the will which way He pleases. What “Cyrus” now did had long been said to be the “confirming of the word of God’s servants” (see Isaiah 44:26). A mighty
monarch was influenced to act in accordance with “the word of the LORD” by his mouth.

B. The king’s decree (Ezra 1:2-4).

1. (vs. 2). This verse says “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.”

In the proclamation given by “Cyrus king of Persia,” he first said that “The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth.” The title “The LORD God of heaven” identifies “the LORD” as the supreme authority and power (see Ezra 5:12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23; Nehemiah 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20; Daniel 2:18-19, 37, 44; Jonah 1:9). It’s amazing to me that Cyrus actually used God’s special name, the tetragrammaton YHWH, the four Hebrew letters usually transliterated as Yahweh or JHVH (Jehovah) signifying the Hebrew name for God which the Jews regarded as too holy to pronounce. Certainly “Cyrus” recognized the true “God,” but he probably considered Him to be one of many existing gods, which was typical of polytheistic monarchs. “Cyrus” went on to say that “The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth.” Here the king’s testimony to the sovereignty of God was probably just a formality for him, since history reveals that he said similar things about other gods. This sounds as if the king was speaking from a point of vanity for there were many “kingdoms of the earth” which “Cyrus” had nothing to do with. However, he seems to mean that God had given him everything that was given to Nebuchadnezzar, whose
dominion, Daniel said, was “to the end of the earth” (see Daniel 4:22). Not only had God given him “all the kingdoms of the earth,” the king also said that “he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.” The term “house” refers primarily to the temple, but in the end it will include the city of God and the people of God. The rebuilding of the “house” of God is a dominant theme in both Ezra and Nehemiah. The fact that “Cyrus” declared that God had “charged” or commanded him to “build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” may have come to him in a vision or dream, and he confirmed it by comparing it to the prophecy of Isaiah, where his doing it was foretold. It was only proper that the temple be built in “Jerusalem.” Ancient Israel had worshiped God illegitimately in other locations (see I Kings 12:28-33; Amos 4:4). But because of God’s commands and David’s leadership, “Jerusalem” became the political and religious center for Israel (see II Samuel 5:6-9; 6:1-17; I Kings 11:36; II Chronicles 6:6; 7:12; Psalms 78:67-72). Now that God’s people were returning to “Jerusalem, which is in Judah,” proper worship would take place there.

2. (vs. 3). This verse says “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,) which is in Jerusalem.” With the question, “Who is there among you of all his people?” Cyrus was giving all the Jews that were in his dominions the freedom to “go up to Jerusalem,” and “build the house (temple) of the LORD God of Israel” there. By acknowledging that “the LORD
God of Israel, (he is the God), it appears that Cyrus believed that the “God of Israel” was Israel’s only God, and therefore, they were obligated to worship Him only and particularly in “Jerusalem.”

3. (vs. 4). This verse says “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.” The phrase “And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth” refers to Jews who decided to stay in Babylon. The phrase “let the men of his place” most likely refers to Gentiles living in Babylon. They were commanded to “help him (those who were returning) with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts be assisted.” The “silver” and “gold” would be necessary for the economy in Jerusalem and the establishment of the temple (see Ezra 2:69; 6:5; 8:26-27). The “goods” could refer to food items and the “beasts” refers to necessary flocks (sheep) and herds (cattle and oxen). The “freewill offering” or additional gifts were to be used “for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” It’s quite possible that the Jews had conducted themselves so well among their neighbours that they would “help” the returning Jews with whatever they needed for the trip. At least many would be kind to them because they saw that the government supported it. God can, wherever He pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to His people, and make those who have weakened the hands of His people to strengthen them, as in the case of the Babylonians. Cyrus also gave his good wishes to those
who went when he said “his God be with him.”

IV. PREPARING TO RETURN TO JERUSALEM (Ezra 1: 5-8, 11)

A. Leaders assembled (Ezra 1:5). This verse says “Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.” As the Jews prepared to begin their journey home, they were led by “the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin.” These were the heads or patriarchs of the extended families from the tribes of “Judah and Benjamin.” These two tribes made up the southern kingdom of “Judah” and were specifically exiled by the Babylonians (see II Kings 24:2). Also returning were “the priests and the Levites.” Their service would be required once the temple was restored upon their return (see Ezra 8:15-17, 24-30). Also among this group returning to Jerusalem were “all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.” In other words, everyone whom God had encouraged “to build the house of the LORD” went up to “Jerusalem.” God’s sovereign power generated both the king’s decree and the people’s response. The same God who had raised up the “spirit” of Cyrus to proclaim this liberty also raised up His people’s “spirits” to take advantage of it, for it was done, “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the LORD of hosts” (see Zechariah 4:6). Whatever good
we do, we owe it solely to the grace of God. He stirs up our “spirits” so that we can do good: “For it is God which worketh in you (us) both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (see Philippians 2:13). Note: We can be sure that the temptation was strong for some of them to stay in Babylon for not all the Jews returned at this time. They probably had convenient settlements there, and had an agreeable acquaintance with the neighbours. The discouragements of their return were many and great. The journey was long, their wives and children were probably not fit for travelling; their own land was a strange land, to them and the road to it was unknown. They were going up to “Jerusalem” which was all in ruins, and in the midst of enemies to whom they would be an easy prey. Because of this, many stayed in Babylon, at least they didn’t go with the first group. But there were some who got over these difficulties, and they were those “whose spirits God had raised.” God, by His Spirit and grace filled them with the will to be free, a love for their own land, and a longing for the free and public exercise of their religion. It may be that if God had left them to themselves, and to the counsels of men, they would have remained in Babylon. But He put it into their hearts to set their faces toward Zion, and as strangers not knowing the way there, they would ask how to get there (see Jeremiah 50:4-5). They were a new generation who had never been to Judah so they went out like their father Abraham from the land of the Chaldees, not knowing where they were going (see Hebrews 11:8). God can, wherever he pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to his people, and
make those to strengthen their hands that have weakened them.

B. Resources received (Ezra 1:6-8, 11).

1. (vs. 6). This verse says, “And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.” Just as the king had commanded (see verse 4), everyone who was around the Jews, encouraged them by supplying articles of “silver,” with “gold,” with “goods,” with “cattle,” and with valuable things, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering. God can, wherever he pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to his people, and make those to strengthen their hands that have weakened them.

2. (vs. 7). This verse says “Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods…” To give proof of the sincerity of his affection to the house of God, “Cyrus” not only released the people of God, but he also restored the vessels of the temple. We are told that “Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD.” When “Cyrus the king” conquered Babylon, he took over the treasury of the Babylonians which included “the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his
When “Nebuchadnezzar” invaded “Jerusalem,” he took items from the temple (see II Kings 24:12-13; 25:13-15; II Chronicles 36:10, 18; Jeremiah 52:17-20), and “put them in the house of his gods.” God made sure that “the vessels” of the temple were not lost, melted down, or mixed with other “vessels” so they could not be identified. Now these “vessels” were being taken back to “the house of the LORD” in “Jerusalem.” Likewise, God takes care of His living “vessels” of whom it is said “The Lord knows them that are his” (see II Timothy 2:19), and they shall “never perish” (see John 10:27-28). Although these “vessels” had been put into an idol’s temple, and probably used in the service of idols, they were given back to be used for God.

3. (vs. 8). This verse says “Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.” The vessels that the king had removed from the treasury were entrusted to “Mithredath the treasurer” who brought them out, and “numbered” or counted them out to “Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.” The term “prince of Judah” probably means the governor or leader “of Judah.” In Ezra 5:14, “Sheshbazzar” was described as the “governor” of “Judah” (see Ezra 5:14). Note: There is occasionally a debate over the identities of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. Sheshbazzar was an older Jewish official who was appointed by Cyrus and served in Judah (see Ezra 5:14). Zerubbabel was a younger man who was recognized as a political leader among the Jews. He was the son of Shealtiel and an
ancestor of Jesus (see Ezra 5:2; Matt 1:12, 13).

4. (vs. 11). This verse says “All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.” The exiles returned to “Jerusalem” with the articles for the temple according to the decree of Cyrus. The “vessels” that were brought back to “Jerusalem” were itemized in verses 9-10 which are not part of our printed text. Here, all the articles of “gold and of silver” that “Sheshbazzar” the governor brought “with them of the captivity” or with the exiles who went “from Babylon up to Jerusalem” totaled 5400 items. The LORD kept His promise that after chastening His people for breaking the covenant, He would bring them back to the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 30:1-5).

V. THE ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM (EZRA 2:64-70)

A. The returnees (Ezra 2:64-67).

1. (vs. 64). This verse says “The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore...” Chapter 2:1-60 is not part of our printed text, but those verses give an itemized count of the number of Jews returning on this first trip back to Jerusalem. Then, in this verse 64, the total number is given as “forty and two thousand three hundred and
threescore” or 42,360. This is the same total as in Nehemiah 7:66. However, the sum of the figures in the list in Ezra is only 29,818, while the sum of the list in Nehemiah 7 is 31,089. The difference in the totals may be because certain groups may have been counted without being listed, or an error might have occurred when copying the manuscripts.

2. (vs. 65). This verse says “Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.” It seems that the total given in verse 64 did not include “their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven.” The “servants” may refer to Jews who had to sell themselves as “servants” because they were poor (see Leviticus 25:39-40). There were 7,337 “servants and their maids” in addition to “two hundred singing men and singing women” who probably sang songs of Zion as the people traveled to Jerusalem (see Isaiah 35:10).

3. (vs. 66). This verse says “Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five...” Of course, these Jews would need livestock during their journey as well as when they arrived in Jerusalem. They had 736 “horses” and 245 “mules.”

4. (vs. 67). This verse says “Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.” In addition to the horses and mules,
the returnees had 435 “camels” and 6720 “asses” or donkeys.

**B. Offerings presented by the returnees (Ezra 2:68-70).**

1. (vs. 68). This verse says “And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place...” As noted in verse 5, “the chief of the fathers” were the heads or patriarchs of the extended families from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. When they arrived in “Jerusalem” and went “to the house of the LORD” or the temple, they freely gave to the treasury to be used “to set it (the temple) up in his place.”

2. (vs. 69). This verse says “They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests’ garments.” The chief of the fathers not only gave freely, but they “gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work.” In other words, they gave according as they were able to give (see II Corinthians 9:7). These are the things they gave for building the Temple: “one thousand drams of gold” (about 1100 pounds of gold), “five thousand pound of silver” and “one hundred priests’ garments” or 100 coats that the priests wore.

3. (vs. 70). Our final verse says “So the priests,
and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.” This verse looks ahead to the time when the first returnees reached Jerusalem and Judah. We are told that once there, the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.” The “porters” were the gatekeepers of the soon to be built temple and “the Nethinims” were those who had dedicated their lives to service in the temple but not as “priests.” However, their specific duties are not clear in scripture (see I Chronicles 9:2; Ezra 8:20).

VI. Conclusion. In this week’s lesson, we see how God used Cyrus, the king of Persia to fulfill a decades old prophecy. Isaiah had prophesied that Cyrus, under God’s direction, would allow the Jewish people to return to their own land and worship God as they should and where they should. Because He is sovereign, God can use anyone He wants to accomplish His will—and He normally does!