

## Study 0055

### Scripture Text: *Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-15; 7:1-28*

In our last study, we saw how, after decades and centuries of idolatry and apostasy, God finally allowed His people to be taken away as captives from the Promised Land. We saw the kinds of atrocities engaged in by the various kings in encouraging the people of God to turn away from God and unto idolatry. We also saw the influence of foreign wives on the kings, and how this negatively affected the people, beginning with Solomon. We, however, saw how a few kings, particularly, of Judah, the Southern kingdom, who were righteous, and who through their righteous actions and worship of God brought peace and prosperity to their nation. Unfortunately, the idolatry and apostasy of the evil kings in both kingdoms had done irreparable spiritual damage, and this led to the exile of the people from the Promised Land. In sending the people of Judah into exile, God said that it was so that the land could enjoy the Sabbath which the people did not allow it to enjoy, contrary to His word. So, after seventy years, God returned the people of Judah back to their land, as He had spoken through Jeremiah, the prophet (**2 Chronicles 36:14-21; Jeremiah 25:1-13**).

### The Old Covenant Era Worship: The Post-Exile Period

The return of the children of Israel, essentially, those of the tribes of Benjamin, Judah and Levi (**Ezra 1:5**), from exile was a divinely motivated exodus, for it was God who got Cyrus, the king of Persia, and ruler of the then known world to decree the return of the children of Judah back to Jerusalem (**2 Chronicles 36:22-23**). There were actually two post-exile exoduses: The first one was led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the chief priest, in the first year of Cyrus (**Ezra 2:1-2**); and the second one occurred in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, and led by Ezra, a priest, who had prepared himself for the task of teaching the people of Israel, the law of Moses (**Ezra 7:1-10**). Nehemiah, who arrived in Jerusalem in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, was on a mission to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem, and his journey is not considered an exodus (**Nehemiah 2:1-11**). A fuller review of these exoduses and all that occurred in the land upon their arrival are documented in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: the accounts in these books span the period *circa* 559 B.C. to *circa* 424 B.C.

When Cyrus, the King of Persia, gave his decree for the return of the children of Israel, it is instructive to note that the rebuilding of the house of God in Jerusalem was a very fundamental part of the decree (**Ezra 1:3**). This again brings us to the centrality of the house or temple of God in the everyday life of His people. Indeed, the worship of God is the reason for the salvation of mankind, as the salvation of the children of Israel from the bondage of Babylon clearly shows! We find here, some similarities between the post-exile exoduses, and the exodus led by Moses, as follows:

- (a) God was the initiator.
- (b) There was a prince, and a priest in each of the exoduses. In the exodus led by Ezra, he was both prince and priest; but when Nehemiah arrived as Governor (**Nehemiah 5:14**), Nehemiah became the prince, while Ezra, remained the priest.
- (c) God's people did not return empty handed. They were given gifts, part of which was used for building the house of God.
- (d) The people were directly involved in the building of the house of God, through their personal contributions and involvement.

We can see these principles in the salvation of mankind today: salvation is initiated by God; those saved are led by the Prince of Peace, Who is also our High Priest; those saved are given gifts, which is expected to be used for building the house of God (both physical and

spiritual); and, those saved are expected to be directly involved in the building of the house of God, through their giving, involvement, and commitment.

When the Israelites who returned from exile with Zerubbabel and Jeshua arrived, the first thing they did was to build an altar for the offering of sacrifices in worship of God, before proceeding to rebuild the house of God (**Ezra 3:1-5**). With the altar in place, they were able to offer their sacrifices, and observe the feast of tabernacles, as well as continue to offer the daily morning and evening sacrifices. Then the people brought of their substance and purchased the materials that were needed for the work of rebuilding the house of God. They began by laying the foundation, at the completion of which there were mixed reactions—the older people who had seen the temple Solomon built wept, while the younger people rejoiced. But that was how far they were to go for another fifteen (15) years, for there was opposition to the work. That opposition came from the people who were brought in to occupy Samaria by the Assyrians, centuries before. These people, who had combined the worship of God with the worship of their own idols, had requested to be involved in the rebuilding of the house of God along with the children of Israel, but they were promptly turned down (**Ezra 4:1-3**). The refusal by the children of Israel to have people foreign to the worship of God to be involved in the building of the house of God, made them targets of attacks of calumny by these foreigners, who did everything to weaken the resolve of God's children to rebuild the house of God, and eventually, they made the work to cease (**Ezra 4:4-24**)! However, through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, God spoke to the people to resume work on the temple, 15 years after work stopped, which they did (**Ezra 5:1ff; 6:14; Haggai 1:1ff; Zechariah 4:1ff**). And even though there was intense opposition against the renewed work, rather than the opposition succeeding, they (the opposition) were directed by Darius, the King at the time, to send resources needed for the building and completion of the rebuilding of the house of God. It is indeed significant to note that what stopped the work was the opposition of the enemies of the children of God, but what made work to resume, was the word of God through His prophets. Once God had spoken, every attempt to stop the work failed; in fact, the letter written to King Darius, seeking his authority to stop the work, only worked in favour of the children of God, as the King directed that they send money collected as taxes to the work and ensure the completion of the building as well as for the provision of sacrifices for the daily offerings (**Haggai 2:6-8**).

Unfortunately, those who returned with Zerubbabel who had determined to live for God (**Ezra 6:16-22**) soon went about living as they liked, and even contracted marriages with foreigners, and fraternized with them. The priests were as guilty of these as were the people (**Ezra 9:1-2**). Thus, when Ezra came on the scene some 58 years after the completion of the rebuilding of the temple, it was to bring about a rebuilding of the lives of the people in a spiritual sense, through the sound teaching of the word of God (the laws of Moses). Ezra also, prayed, interceded, and fasted, to God, for the return of the hearts of the people back to God (**Ezra 9:3-15**). Nehemiah, who came about 14 years after Ezra, was motivated to return by the report he heard about the broken down walls of the city of Jerusalem (**Nehemiah 1:1-11**), and to some extent, the broken lives of the people of God, as well as the breakdown of law and order among them. Nehemiah returned as governor of Judah, and hence, the prince of the nation, while Ezra continued to function as the high priest and spiritual leader. Nehemiah, with the help of God, was able to get the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, as well as, lead the people in a spiritual revival jointly with Ezra, calling the people to a rededication to God, and a renunciation of living contrary to the word of God. This revival continued with Malachi, the prophet, who spoke for God, and called both the people, and the priests and Levites to return to the true worship of God, by asking them to renounce their

selfish and unrighteous lifestyle (**Malachi 3:16-18; 4:1-6**). Through Malachi, God berated the people and the priests regarding the unacceptable and unholy sacrifices they brought to Him (**Malachi 1:1-14**); their infidelity to their wives as well as the incidents of divorce among His people (**Malachi 2:10-16**); the uncleanness among the priests and Levites (**Malachi 2:1-9; 3:1-7**); the failure of the people to bring all their tithes and offerings into the house of God for the sustenance of the priests, the Levites, and the needy (**Malachi 3:8-12; Nehemiah 13:10-13**); and, the general apathy of the people to righteous living (**Malachi 3:13-15**).

### **EXERCISE**

Please state true or false to the statements below:

1. Divine salvation is initiated when a person desires to be free of oppression.
2. Divine salvation is led by the Prince of Peace, Jesus, and the pastor, the priest.
3. No saved person comes into the kingdom of God empty handed.
4. Every saved soul is expected to be involved in building the house of God.
5. Worship can take place in the absence of a physical building.
6. A critical element of worship in the post-exile Old Covenant Era was the brazen altar.
7. A person's lifestyle is a mark of whether or not he is a true worshipper of God.
8. The true worship of God is limited to performing ones religious responsibilities.
9. True revival must involve social and spiritual transformation.
10. Leadership is not to blame if things are not going well among the people of God.