

“The Return”
(Ezra 1)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. We saw last week a picture and a prophecy regarding Christ.
 - a. He appeared in the fiery furnace to save His children, as a picture of what He would soon come to do on the cross.
 - b. And He sent Gabriel to tell Daniel when he would do this: in 70 weeks of years, or 490 years, from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem.
2. In revealing these things, the Lord had two audiences in mind:
 - a. First, His people who were living in the exile:
 - (i) He wanted to give them hope by showing them that, notwithstanding their circumstances, He was still sovereign and His intention to bring the Messiah had not changed: His coming was near.
 - (ii) And He wanted to remind them what Messiah would do when He finally arrived: He would save them from the fiery furnace of His wrath.
 - b. But He also wanted to show His saints who would come later (us) some things to give us hope.
 - (i) The hope that comes from knowing the Bible is in fact His Word:
 - (a) When we see that these things actually came to pass, it assures us that God is the One who is speaking.
 - (b) This gives us the hope that we have not believed in vain; when the end comes, we will be very glad that we have trusted and followed Jesus.
 - (ii) He also wanted to show us:
 - (a) That He would be with us in our troubles, as He was with the 3 men in the fiery furnace.
 - (i) He knows what we're going through; He actually planned these things.
 - (ii) And having planned them, He will be with us through our trials until He has worked them all together for good.
 - (b) He will also deliver us from the furnace of God's wrath, if we will only trust in Him.

B. Preview.

1. The exile and return is the last period before the coming of Christ, and it is a time when the Lord was preparing His coming.
2. This morning, we see another large step forward: the overthrow of Babylon and the return to the land of Promise.

3. As we consider these things, let's be reminded that the Lord rules over the hearts of men and turns them whatever way He wills.

II. Sermon.

- A. The first thing we see this morning is the overthrow of Babylon.
 1. Remember, Babylon was originally built to stand against God.
 - a. Those who built it should have migrated out of the area to fill the earth again after the Flood.
 - b. But they resisted God's plan and agreed together to build a tower that would keep them united as a people and against God.
 2. But the Lord overthrew their plans by dividing their languages.
 - a. This divided their strength and forced most of them to relocate.
 - b. Through this, He effectively set the clock of a world-wide rebellion and the Day of the Lord back.
 - c. It also prevented them destroying the church at that time.
 - d. Babel was the name of the city they built – the same city that later became known as Babylon.
 3. Just as the Lord advanced His work in those days by dividing their languages, so He advanced it again by overthrowing Babylon.
 - a. On the night Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar, offended God by misusing His holy vessels in a drunken party, Persia conquered Babylon and killed Belshazzar, just as the Lord had written on the wall, "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE' [from which we get mina, unit of measurement] – God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. 'TEKEL' [to weigh] – you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. 'PERES' [to break in two] – your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:25-28).
 - b. This was not only God's vengeance on the nation that injured His people, it was also a large step forward in God's work of redemption because of what He now does through the ruler of Persia.
- B. Second, with the Persian Empire now firmly in control, we see the Lord move on the hearts of the Persian kings to issue several decrees that allow the Jews to return to the land to rebuild their Temple and their city.
 1. As soon as Cyrus was firmly in control, he passed a decree that allowed the Jews to return to their own land to rebuild their city and their temple.
 - a. "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him!"

Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem””” (Ezra 1:1-3).

- b. Not only did Cyrus allow them to return, he also commanded that they be given everything they need to make this possible, “Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:4).
2. Next to the Lord’s bringing His people out of Egypt, the return is the greatest picture of redemption we have in the Old Testament.
 - a. It was led by Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, one of Christ’s ancestors.
 - (i) Haggai prophesied that the Lord Jesus would come from His line, ““On that day,’ declares the LORD of hosts, ‘I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like a signet *ring*, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD of hosts”” (2:23).
 - (ii) Matthew tells us in his Gospel that he was in fact in Messiah’s lineage (1:11-16).
 - (iii) He led the Jews back into the land, and together with Joshua, the son of Josedek the high priest, rebuilt the temple.
 - b. This is as much a picture of the Lord’s redemption as His leading His people out of Egypt to the Promised Land.
 - (i) Moses – a type of Christ – along with Aaron – the first high priest – led God’s people out of Egypt to Canaan.
 - (ii) In this case, Zerubbabel – an ancestor and type of Christ – along with Joshua – the high priest, whose name, as you already know, means the Lord is salvation – leads God’s people out of captivity and back into the Promised Land.
 - (iii) In both cases, the Lord granted to them articles of gold and silver from their enemies so they would have the materials they needed to complete the work.
 - (iv) Both of these were pictures of what Christ would do for us: through His life and death, He would lead us from our bondage to the world, to heaven.
 3. This decree of Cyrus was only the first. The work continued under several successive Persian kings.
 - a. It continued under Darius.
 - (i) When the enemies of God’s people – the surrounding nations; primarily the Samaritans – tried to stop the work, the Lord encouraged them to keep building through the prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5).
 - (ii) He further helped them through a decree issued by King Darius that not only warned these enemies to leave them alone so that they could complete this work, but also to provide whatever they needed under the threat of death if they refused.

- (iii) He also ordered that the gold and silver utensils that Nebuchadnezzar took from the original Temple be returned to them (Ezra 6).
- b. Under Artaxerxes.
 - (i) Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to return to the land and ordered that He be provided with whatever he needed to accomplish his work.
 - (ii) “I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are *in the provinces* beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently, *even* up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons” (Ezra 7:21-23).
 - (iii) This was the most generous of all the decrees having to do with Jerusalem, and the particular one that marked the beginning of Daniel’s seventy weeks.
- c. The king of Persia also gave Nehemiah a commission to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2).
 - (i) “And I said to the king, ‘If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors *of the provinces* beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go.’ And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me” (Neh. 2:7-8).
 - (ii) The Lord not only turned the hearts of these kings to help His people when they were seemingly helpless, He did this in the face of attacks at every step by their enemies, the Samaritans. It’s no wonder the Jews hated the Samaritans, as we see when we come to the New Testament Scriptures.
- d. As the Lord had originally brought His people and settled them in the land under Joshua, so He brought them in again to reestablish them to prepare for the coming of His Son. *Now the Temple was ready to be filled again with God’s glory, as the Lord said He would.*
 - (i) “On the twenty-first of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet saying, ‘Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people saying, Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison? But now take courage, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD, ‘take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work; for I am with you,’ declares the LORD of

hosts. 'As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!' For thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD of hosts. The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,' declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the LORD of hosts" (Hag. 2:1-9).

- (ii) That glory would come in the person of Jesus Christ, "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 3:1).

C. We should again be encouraged by these things that whatever the Lord has planned, He will do no matter what stands in His way.

1. Babylon stood against Him – the city of man – but it could not prevail. He divided their languages, He humbled their king, and He overthrew them.
2. We might have thought that the kings of Persia would have stood in their way as well, but they didn't. The Lord turned their hearts to become His servants, and they actually promoted His work.
3. No one can stop what God intends to do. The world may stand in the church's way and threaten to destroy her, but they will not succeed – God's work will go forward.
 - a. The work move forward because Jesus is on the throne and He rules over all.
 - b. He controls the heart of all men: they are in His hands.
 - c. What we see happening now is all in His plan, every decision of our government – this doesn't make what they're doing right, but it reminds us that the Lord will use even their ungodly decisions to promote His work.
 - d. And even though it may sometimes seem that the kingdom of darkness has the upper hand, it never does: the Lord is fully in control and He will bring about what He intends.
 - e. If we could just apply this to all the situations we face, we would never need to worry or be afraid. The author to the Hebrews, seeking to encourage his Jewish-Christian audience not to abandon Christ because of the fear of Rome, writes, "He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,' so that we may confidently say, 'The Lord is my Helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?'" (13:5-6).
 - f. Are you a believer and yet afraid this morning? Learn to trust in the Lord's faithfulness; "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25); He will do what He says.
 - g. Are you not a believer and afraid not only of what might happen to you in this world, but also in the world to come? Then put your trust in the Lord now to save you; He will take away your fear, and give you the confidence you need to stand before Him on that great day. Amen.