

The Story Adult Study Guide

For the Week of February 16, 2020

Chapter 19: "The Return Home"



Key Events: the exiles return to Judah under King Cyrus, rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah

Key Characters: Cyrus, Zerubbabel, Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah (see pages 491-492 for descriptions)

Bible Reference for this Chapter: Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1, 8

1. God moved Cyrus king of Persia to institute a policy of religious pacification of subject nations. A minority of exiles returned to Judah and most stayed in Mesopotamia. What assumptions can be drawn about the Israelites who chose to return? What about those who didn't return?
2. Read the words of the prophet Haggai on the bottom of page 266 (second to the last paragraph "Now this is what the Lord Almighty says."). What kind of lifestyle is described here, and what are the dangers?
3. On the top of page 268, God says through Haggai, "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house." How is this possible since the former temple built by Solomon was much larger and more spectacular than the rebuilt temple?
4. Pages 268-270 contain a list of ten promises of blessing, each beginning with the words, "This is what the Lord Almighty says:" (Zechariah 8). Summarize these promises flowing from God's abundant grace.
5. Official government correspondences and decrees are recorded on pages 270-273 (Ezra 5-6). What are some "little details" God attended to in this episode to accomplish his grand purposes? What little details does God care for in our lives that often go unnoticed?
6. Based on this chapter, how had the Lord's 70-year discipline affected the people of Israel? When do people typically come to understand and appreciate discipline?

7. Other thoughts and comments? Please share messages of personal comfort, hope, and encouragement you received from chapter 19.

Prayer Suggestions

- Ask God to help me see my misplaced priorities. Pray for strength to put God first.
- Thank God for his control in my life to serve my good, over the big and little things.

Study Guide Helps

1. The exiles spent up to 70 years away from their homeland. Those who were deported from Judah had either died or grown old in Babylon, and many Israelites were born in Babylon and only lived there. The remnant that chose to return likely considered Jerusalem and Judah to be their home, the place where God wanted them to live. These people needed resolve to move a great distance and rebuild their former homes, and they needed courage to face people who now lived in Judah and resisted their return. They demonstrated fruits of faith by their desire to build an altar and worship God according to the Law of Moses. Those that chose to remain in Mesopotamia weren't necessarily unbelievers; they had made a life for themselves there and decided to stay. Far away from Judah, Israelite believers could share God's truth to Gentile people and plant seeds of faith for generations to come.

2. Background: The returning exiles had laid the temple's foundation, but due to opposition from Samaritans the construction was slowed then halted for a number of years. Weary of the resistance, the people thought that it wasn't the time to finish the temple and they turned their attention to building their own homes and settling down. God didn't need the temple; the people needed the temple which served as a physical representation of God's presence among them and a symbol of placing God first in their hearts and minds. Haggai described a lifestyle of misplaced priorities – God's people are tempted to focus on earthly affairs and turn their attention away from God and his Word. Even today, busy lifestyles involving jobs, school, family life, social life, hobbies, etc. can draw us away from worship, Bible study and Christian service, and our faith wanes in the balance.

3. The rebuilt temple lasted longer than Solomon's temple. Finished and dedicated in 516 B.C., the rebuilt temple lasted almost 600 years up to and beyond the time of Christ. (In 20 B.C., King Herod expanded the temple and the temple stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.) Not only would God be worshipped and glorified in the rebuilt temple for many generations to come, but God's glory would be shown through the Messiah who would be present there. Many events in Jesus' life took place in the temple.

4. The promises include references to the physical restoration of God's people from exile, bondage and dispersion, and their spiritual restoration by God's grace. *They will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God* (p. 269; Zechariah 8:8) describes the covenant relationship between the righteous and merciful God and his chosen people. *Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing* (p. 269; Zech. 8:13) recalls their former disobedience and God's wrath, and the subsequent deliverance and blessing from God. Ultimately, the fulfillment of the Messiah through God's people will be a blessing to the entire world, and Gentiles will seek the Lord: *In those days ten people from all languages and nations . . . Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you* (p. 270; Zech. 8:23).

5. God certainly orchestrated people and events "behind the scenes," using seemingly insignificant details to play a big role in his plan to secure a remnant of Israelites in Judah through whom the Messiah would come. Examples: Persian governors questioned the legitimacy of the Jewish elders' claim to rebuild the temple, which set the stage for King Darius' decree to (re)authorize the project; due to the bureaucratic efficiency of the Persian government, the decree document of King Cyrus was found in the archives which authorized the temple project almost 20 years earlier; not only did Darius authorize the project, he issued a "cease and desist" order for Persian officials to stay away from Jerusalem and stop interfering, and told the officials to pay for any and all project expenses, including the daily supplies needed for priests to offer sacrifices. Participants can share examples of God's control over their lives by way of seemingly trivial details: God looks after the big and little, the major and minor affairs of life for our good.

6. Out of love, God's discipline is intended to wake people up, bring them to their knees before the Lord, and build them up again in his mercy and love; discipline renews and/or strengthens the spiritual relationship between God and his children. Based on the Bible account, God's discipline worked very effectively to lead Israel to repentance and restore them through his forgiveness and compassion. The returning exiles exhibited fruits of faith in their commitment to be faithful to the Lord and follow his ways. God's discipline was also instrumental in preserving a remnant of his chosen people in Judah to fulfill the gospel promise of the Savior. Our human nature usually questions and resists while being disciplined; afterward we hopefully appreciate the wisdom and benefits.

7. Answers will vary. Consider/discuss elements of chapter 19 that relate to our daily walk of faith.