

# A Good Shepherd Sacred Story

## The People of God Return

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## **THE PEOPLE OF GOD RETURN ... MATERIALS**

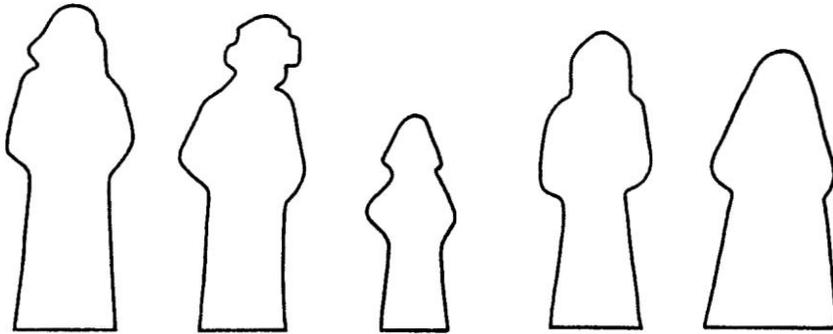
- medium wicker basket to hold:
  - 5 wooden people of God figures
  - wooden figure of Cyrus
  - wooden figure of Zerubbabel
  - 2 wooden figures of people who remained in Jerusalem



Cyrus



Zerubbabel



People of God



People who remained in Jerusalem

**THE PEOPLE OF GOD RETURN •.. II CHRONICLES 36:22-23, EZRA 1,2,3,4,5,6**

**ACTIONS**

After speaking, stand and get the story from its shelf. Return to the circle and sit down, placing the story basket next to you.

During the silence, reverently stroke one of the wooden pieces to center yourself and the children.

Place the five people of God figures in a group at the center of the right half of the storytelling area.

Nod your head slowly.

Touch two or three of the people of God.

Touch two other people of God.

Place Cyrus to the right, a short distance from the people of God.

Turn Cyrus to face the left and point to the left as you speak.

Pantomime taking things from a shelf and giving them to someone else.

**WORDS**

Watch carefully where I go to get this story so you will know where to find it if you choose to make this your work today or another day.

All of the words to this story are inside of me. If you will make silence with me, I will find all the words to this sacred story of the people of God.

The people of God had lived in Babylon for almost 50 years.

Many of the people who had been taken to Babylon had died there.

But many of them had taught their children about the land where they used to live.

And many of them hoped one day to go back to the land of Judah to the city of Jerusalem.

Finally it happened! Cyrus, who was king of Persia, conquered Nebuchadnezzar and became the new king over Babylon.

Cyrus told the people of God they could go back to Jerusalem and rebuild their city and their temple.

Then Cyrus gave the people of God all those things that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the city and the temple.

Place Zerubbabel just slightly to the left of the five people of God, then, move Zerubbabel and three of the people of God to the center of the storytelling area. Leave the two people of God closest to Cyrus in place.

Gently touch the two people of God who chose to stay in Babylon.

With palms down, move both hands quickly out to either side from the center of the left half of the storytelling area.

Place the two figures of people who remained in Jerusalem to the left of the people of God who had returned.

Hold up two fingers as you speak.

Nod your head. Point to the center of the left half of the storytelling area with your hand to indicate the temple in the center of the city. Then, outline the walls around the city with your finger (be sure to include the six wooden figures in Jerusalem).

Touch each of the people of God as you speak.

The people of God, led by a man named Zerubbabel, went back to the land of Judah and began the huge job of rebuilding the city and the temple.

Not all of the people who had been taken to Babylon chose to go back to Jerusalem.

Those who did, found that the city was a mess of destroyed buildings that had not been cared for.

Only a few people still lived in Jerusalem. They were some of the people who had been left behind, and their children.

It took two years after they returned to Jerusalem for the people to begin the work building the temple.

It took many, many years to complete the building of the temple and the walls around the city.

The people of God had finally come home.

### **WONDERING QUESTIONS:**

I wonder why Cyrus let the people of God go back to Jerusalem?

I wonder why all the people didn't go back to Jerusalem?

I wonder how the people felt when they returned and saw their city still destroyed?

I wonder what the people who had been left in Jerusalem thought of those who came back?

Carefully place each of the wooden pieces back into the basket.

Watch carefully how I put these materials away, so you will know how to use them if you choose to make this story your work today or another day.

After speaking, stand and carry the basket back to the shelf. Then return to the circle and sit down.

Watch carefully where I return this story so you will know where to find it if you choose to make this your work today or another day.

Go around the circle, having each child choose their work before dismissing them all together.

Let's choose our work now. Maybe there is something special in this story that you would like to paint or draw. Let's decide and begin.

## **THE PEOPLE OF GOD RETURN ... TEACHER HELPS**

The story of the return of the exiles is one that very few adults or children know. We tend to stop studying the lives of the people of God when we finish with the prophets and the story is never given an ending. This story is not really an ending either, but a new beginning. It was not however, the new beginning the people had dreamed it would be. When it came time for the exiles to return to Jerusalem, less than a third of them chose to go back. Babylon was a beautiful and sophisticated city. A generation had grown up in Babylon and were accustomed to the culture, surroundings and lifestyle they'd adapted to in the city. The idea of return to the destroyed city of Jerusalem in the basically rural setting around Jerusalem did not appeal to many of them. Those who went back were indeed a faithful remnant. Later there would be another group that would return, but for the time being it was the ones who had kept the stories and the hope of Jerusalem alive.

Remember that those who were left in Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar deported the Jews were the old, sick, lame and poor. They were not the kind of people who would have had the ability, willingness or resources to begin to rebuild the city or the temple. Rather, they probably took the best of the land and possessions that were left behind by those who had to leave and took them for their own. They raised a generation in Jerusalem who had come to believe that the land they lived on was theirs. No doubt there was a conflict between the two groups when the exiles returned. (Ezra 4: 1-4)

Our focus is on the fulfillment of the promise that God made to return the people of God to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was from the line of David and the "proper" person to be in charge of the rebuilding. It must have been no small feat to get this group of people to pull together to rebuild their ruined city, especially when most of the returnees had never seen Jerusalem before it was destroyed. How depressing it must have been to see the weeds growing up where the temple had been and to see the shambles of a once beautiful and prosperous city! But, the Jews did rebuild the city and the temple and they became more important than ever to them. There was a very strict reform movement begun by Ezra and Nehemiah to again purify the Jews and put away foreign wives and children. That is another story for another time.

We begin our wondering questions with the wonderment of why Cyrus let the people return. Though Cyrus is given words that God told him to send the Hebrew people back, he probably was doing the best thing politically for himself. Cyrus understood that he would get nothing from Judah as long as the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. But, if he sent the people back and they again made the land and the city productive he would receive taxes and tribute from the province. The children will not know that and the very young will not understand it, so allow them their answers. I do believe God acted in Cyrus' life to let the people return to Jerusalem.

Next, we wonder why all the people didn't go. Children who have moved will probably answer the most quickly. They will understand that the people didn't want to leave their houses and their friends, their schools and their teachers.

The third question deals with the feelings the people had when they returned and saw the city of Jerusalem still destroyed. Those who have seen their home ruined by fire or flood may have some idea of how depressing it is to witness such destruction. Others will simply say the people were sad or angry. And one or two may say, "They just thought they better fix it. "

The final question opens the possibility that not everyone was happy to have the people from Babylon back. Some children will respond positively, probably because they would understand the people who had been left in Jerusalem would be glad to have help in rebuilding the city. Older children may understand that those people who had been left had come to see the land as theirs and would not be happy to give back what they believed to be theirs.

#### SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN:

Imagine that you and all your friends have just been told that you may leave your homes, travel to a place you've never been and live there. Most of your friends' families decide to stay where they are, but your family decides to go. How would you feel? What would you say?

Your brother has grown up and gone to college. He left a broken bicycle home and you began using it. Then you fixed it up a little. In fact, you started thinking of the bicycle as yours. When he comes home the next summer he claims it back because the bicycle was originally his. What would you say to your brother? Your parents?

In this story we find God keeping God's promise that the people of God, even though it was a small group of them, would return to Jerusalem. Can you think of a time when something God has promised in the Bible really happened in your life?

Note: The book of Ezra (Revised Standard Version) speaks of Nebuchadnezzar (Ne-be-kad-ne-zer). He is the same person as King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel (Revised Standard Version) and also the same person, although the spelling is different, as King Nebuchadrezzar (Ne-be-kad-re-zer) referred to in the Book of Jeremiah (Revised Standard Version).