

'Starting again'

Returning to life after lockdown

"Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong ..." (Haggai 2.3f)

As the lockdown restrictions are gradually eased and we return bit by bit to the rhythms of congregational life, the return of the exiles from Babylon provides an instructive, parallel narrative.

The return from Babylon was both gradual and difficult: it's narrated in the two books Ezra and Nehemiah (which were originally one book), and the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah had an integral part to play in the challenges facing the people back then.

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2. King of kings

".. everyone whose heart God had moved .."

Ezra 1.1-5

The year is 538 BC, and the repercussions of some seismic 'global' events in the ancient world are still being felt. Babylon, which for long enough had been the great (and seemingly unassailable) superpower, had been conquered by Persia in 539 BC. The new king, Cyrus, is rolling out his own rather different political agenda.

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1. Read Ezra.1.1-5. Much of the passage repeats 2 Chron.36.22f, a fact which serves as a reminder to read the book of Ezra in context and to see this as the *sequel* to what has gone before.

Read **2 Chron.36.15-23** for a helpful summary statement of the background: what truths do you think the chronicler was wanting to impress on his readers?

Have there been times in your life when you failed God badly and wondered if there could ever be a way back? How might this narrative encourage and help someone in such circumstances?

2. Read Ezra.1.1. Cyrus' decree had long since been predicted by God (Is.44.28) – in a passage (Is.41-44) whose central argument is that mere idols cannot foretell the future (see Is.41.21ff).

In what two ways does the writer suggest that the sovereignty of God is seen in this particular historical context?

What are the implications of this for ourselves today?

3. Read Ezra.1.2-4. The decree of the king, as Isaiah had prophesied it would (Is.44.28), related specifically to the re-building of the temple.

Read **2 Chron.36.17-19:** if God meant the temple to be rebuilt why did He bring Nebuchadnezzar to destroy it?

How in your own experience have you seen God providing for a work to which He has called you and others?

4. Read Ezra.1.5. The decree of the king was met with a ready response on the part of some of the Jews who were keen to seize the opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

What did God use to move the hearts of the people here?

In what ways (if any!) do you sense God moving *your* heart (even through this passage) to 'build the house of the Lord' in our land today?