

# '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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## 3. A people prepared

*".. to make ready a people prepared for the Lord .."*

Ezra 1.5-11

God does nothing randomly. He plans thoroughly and prepares carefully. So whenever He moves His purpose forward, invariably He'll have prepared the way (and prepared His people) beforehand.

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1. **Read Ezra 1.1-11.** It's well worth reading the whole brief chapter again and seeing how sovereign the Lord was in ensuring that His people were able to return to the land of promise.

What were the different ways in which the writer saw the LORD at work in all the circumstances of the return?

In what different ways have you been aware of the LORD at work in the circumstances of your life over recent months?

**2. Read Ezra 1.5-6.** In God's sovereign providence, the decree of Cyrus had required that the people of his Empire should provide in material terms for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (v.4).

Why do you think it helps people, in regard to their giving, to have a particular project to be asked to support?

Can you think of instances where 'neighbours' have assisted you in some work of God?

What specific work of God (if any) might He be prompting you, even through this passage, to support?

**3. Read Ezra 1.7-8.** When Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem to the ground and took all the treasures of the temple away, most people must have thought they'd never see them again.

In what ways should it be an encouragement to us to see how God provided for the *operation* as well as the construction of the temple?

Have there been times in your life when God has brought back to you what you thought had been lost for good?

**4. Read Ezra 1.7-11.** The desecration of these articles belonging to the temple by Belshazzar, king of Babylon, had issued in the Medes and Persians taking over Babylon (read **Daniel 5.1-31**).

The fruit of Daniel's testimony and prayers was really only seen in subsequent generations: what lessons do you learn from Daniel's life?

The treasurer's name, Mithredath, means 'devoted to Mithra' (the Persian sun-god): why do you think the writer draws some attention to this?