

'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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5. Faith and fear

"..fear was on them .." (ESV)

Ezra 3.1-6

The 7th month was one of the most significant months in Israel's calendar, with three important festivals – the Feast of Trumpets on the 1st day, the Day of Atonement on the 10th and the Feast of Tabernacles starting on the 15th day of the 7th month.

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1. Read Ezra 3.1-6. The 7th month referenced here would have been in the first year of their being back in Jerusalem (that's the implication of 3.8): there was no procrastinating on their part!

What made the people so careful to ensure that what they did was *“in accordance with what is written”* (vv.2 & 4)?

How do *you* go about ensuring your living is in line with what God has written in His Word?

2. Read Ezra 3.1-3. The returning exiles were clearly (and rightly) afraid of the peoples around them: either despite, or because of, that fear (perhaps both) they began to build the altar.

What did their building this altar signify?

Of whom are you afraid, and how do you handle fear when you experience it?

3. Read Ezra 3.4. The Feast of Tabernacles was the last of the three annual festivals when the tribes gathered from all the corners of the land to celebrate God’s covenant goodness to them.

What did the Feast of Tabernacles commemorate (read Lev.23.33-43)?

Why do you think it would have been so significant for these returning exiles?

4. **Read Ezra 3.5-6.** The significance of the altar lay in the fact that it was there, on the altar, that the sacrifices and offerings of the people were laid. Read **Rom.12.1-2** and **Heb.13.11-19.**

What was the point of the offerings and sacrifices?

As you return to the Lord day by day in repentance and faith what are the 'sacrifices' you bring?