

'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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13. Authorised

".. We are servants of the God of heaven and earth .."

Ezra 5.1-17

After the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah the returned exiles resumed the task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, which had been on 'pause' for 18 years: but immediately there was opposition!

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1. Read Ezra 5.1-17. In chapter 4 Ezra had been describing the opposition he faced in his day: in this chapter he records the similar opposition faced by the exiles some 50+ years earlier.

What parallels (if any) can you see between the situation faced by the exiles and that which we face today as we seek to apply ourselves to the work of God?

Do you think that in the aftermath of the pandemic (whenever that will be!) we'll have to *rebuild* from the ground up?

2. Read Ezra 5.1-3. The ministry of these two prophets at this time as they brought God's word to the returned exiles was itself a clear expression of the activity of God Himself on their behalf.

Having over the past weeks worked through the messages brought by Haggai, why were the people so ready to resume their work on the temple?

What examples can you give of the way in which the preaching of God's Word stirs you into action?

(Perhaps in your praying you might pray very specifically that the Lord would again be raising up those who will be ministers of His Word for this and the upcoming generation)

3. Read Ezra 5.4-10. The local officialdom promptly stepped in with a view to stopping the work, almost before it had (re)started, and their approach was plainly calculated to intimidate.

Why were these two questions focused on?

In what ways (if any) can you see the work of the gospel being obstructed by 'bureaucracy' today?

What is the confidence which God's people are given in v.5?

4. Read Ezra 5.11-17. The testimony of the returned exiles in the face of the pressure from officialdom shows they had a very different perspective from that expressed earlier in Ezr.4.4.

In summary, what would you say were the main statements which the exiles were making?

How would you describe the great enterprise to which your life's energies are directed?