

A Journey Through Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra 5-6: Back to Work

The Big Picture:

Chapter 4 ended with the rebuilding work stopping and for a time it seemed that the adversaries had won. Ezra 5&6 shows God at work. By His sovereign power the rebuilding work resumes and is completed – culminating in a joyful dedication of the rebuilt temple and a celebration of the ceremonial practices there. Throughout Ezra 5&6 it is clear that God is at work as the overseer. He is overseeing the reestablishment of His people in the land. This is a fulfilment of His word and His promises – it is all for His redemptive purposes. The temple emphasises the merciful provision He makes for His people. He provides a way for them to come into His presence and worship Him.

Read Ezra 5&6. Then, have a read through Haggai 1 and Zechariah 1:1-17 & 4:1-10 for some background.

God's Word, God's leaders and God's eye:

Haggai and Zechariah offer us a bit of whole-Bible-connection! We can see the links between this part of Ezra and the words of these prophets. The prophets' words come alive in our understanding when we see their place in the great big story! God sends His word into every chapter of the story of His people. Just as the prophets of God were with them, helping them (Ezra 5:2), so God in every age provides His people with His living and active Word, now given to us in the completed inspired Scriptures.

God oversees this remnant by stirring the hearts of kings from afar and by bringing His word to His people, a much needed help. We know that the greatest help ultimately comes through the Word made flesh – Jesus the Messiah, who is God with us fully and finally.

How beautiful it is to read of how God urges His people to return to the task of rebuilding! God's eye has been upon them and now He turns their hearts back to the task in hand.

God provides for the people a three-pronged leadership: prophets, a priest in the line of Aaron and a ruler (Zerubbabel) in the line of David. One of the interesting things about the prophets Haggai and Zechariah is that they didn't just speak to the people, they got involved in the labour. This is an intriguing and exciting foreshadowing of the greatest and one, true perfect leader to come – Jesus Christ.

God's Name:

King Darius might not have understood fully but he rightly says that God has 'caused His name to dwell' in His 'house.' Names in the Scriptures often represent a person's character development and their journey. That's why we see name changes such as *Abram* to *Abraham* and *Jacob* to *Israel*.

By marking the temple as the place where He would place His name and make His holy habitation, God was revealing His glorious self to His people in that place. While He causes His name to dwell in that place, we remember that God is not confined to any building or to any one place.

The wonder of the great big story of the Bible is that God reveals His name to us – just as He did when He told Moses *I AM WHO I AM* (Exodus 3:14). The greatest wonder, of course, is how He reveals Himself in His Son, who has been given the ‘name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow (Philippians 2:9-11).’ On that day we will kneel before Him in glory.

God Shapes:

Ezra 5&6 reminds us of God’s sovereign shaping of events. Whilst we are working for the things of God, others may try to hinder, delay, confuse or frustrate us, but we can proceed confidently. God will accomplish His purposes in the world, no matter what attempt there is to block them. Just as God watched over the people here in Ezra 5&6, He watches over us.

In Ezra 5&6, God acts and intercedes on behalf of His people. He sends the prophets with His strengthening word (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14). ‘The eye of their God’ protects the Jewish elders (5:5). The rebuilding happened by His decree (6:14) and the actions of earthly kings occur as he determines them (6:22). It is He who makes His people joyful! There is a focus here on the temple but there is a wider focus on God’s sovereign hand over all nations and over all history. As the apostle Paul says: *‘The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live. (Acts 17:24-26)’*

Completion and Celebration:

The temple was completed in 515_{BC}. Feasting and celebration was in order! The completion and dedication of the temple is marked by a celebration similar to the one Solomon had when he dedicated the temple in 1 Kings 8:63, although Solomon offered more than 200 times as many cattle and sheep.

There is a time to work and there is a time to celebrate. Both are proper and necessary in these circumstances. It is only right that they celebrated because *‘the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel (Ezra 6:22).’*

Some questions for reflection:

1. (Read Ezra 5:6-6:12) What strikes you about the requirements set out in Darius’ letter? What was King Darius seeking? And what was God clearly doing for His people?
2. Darius refers to the ‘God who has caused His name to dwell there’ – this ‘house of God that is in Jerusalem (6:12).’ In what ways does Darius get God’s purposes exactly right?

3. In what ways does Ezra 6:19-22 bring this section to an appropriate conclusion and focus?
4. Take time to look over what we have covered so far in the book of Ezra. Reflect on some of the key things the Lord may be teaching you and perhaps highlight for yourself some things you might like to review again in the future.

Feel free to get in touch to share what you have learned and what you have been reflecting on during our study. You can email Mark at revmarkmccconnell@gmail.com and/or Emma at revemaycarson@gmail.com.