

Life Group Questions w/b Sunday 3 January 2021

Ezra – a Story of Rebuilding 1

Read: Haggai 2:1-9; Ezra 5:1-5; Ezra 6:13-15

We don't know much about some of the minor prophets, but the great thing about Haggai and Zechariah is that they pop up in the narrative of the Book of Ezra. Their messages served a particular season in Israel's history.

Historical Background

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah are set in the time of rebuilding following the return of God's people from exile in Babylon. Seven decades earlier, Nebuchadnezzar had come to Jerusalem, sacked the city, looted the Temple and destroyed it, taking all of the gold and silver, along with almost all the people. Only a remnant remained.

At the start of the return in 538/9 BC, there were a million Jews living in Babylon.

Almost 50,000 returned in the first wave.

Derek Kidner, one of the leading theologians on this period, wrote, 'They emerged from their long night in Babylon, no longer a kingdom, but a little flock with the makings of a church.'

There were three phases of people returning from Babylon:

- The pioneers under Zerubbabel who was a political leader, and a descendent of King David, and also under Jeshua/ Joshua (same name - one is in Hebrew), a priest.
- The second group of returnees came with Ezra. (458 BC)
- The third group were led by Nehemiah, a generation later.

Wave 1 is covered in Ezra 1-6.

Wave 2 is narrated in Ezra 7-10, and also in Nehemiah 8-9.

Wave 3 is to be found in Nehemiah 1-13

Whilst they were away, the land of Israel had been 'in a time of desolation'. (2 Chronicles 36:21)

There were three phases of rebuilding:

- The pioneers made the worship of God their priority, and rebuilt the Temple.

- The second group rediscovered the depth of corporate worship under Ezra – a great theologian and teacher of the Scriptures.
- Finally, under Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, and the city made secure once more.

Role of the Prophets in the Rebuilding

The pioneers could not have succeeded without the encouragement of Haggai, Zechariah and other prophets. See Ezra 6:14.

Haggai's message is fairly practical. Zechariah was more of a visionary.

We'll look at each of their messages in turn. Depending on what time you have, it would be better to cover Haggai well and leave Zechariah for another day rather than rush through both of them.

The Message of Haggai

Look at Haggai 2:1-5 again. What does he say to encourage the people of God?

Look back into chapter 1, to see if you can find some more words of encouragement.

How can we be more proactive in this ministry of encouragement today?

In Haggai 2:5, we find a command – 'Do not fear'. What basis can you find in this verse, and in the historical background behind it, that means that God's people can live without fear? (See Exodus 3:1-10 for starters. You might also know some Psalms or some New Testament verses that encourage us not to be afraid.)

Look again at Haggai 2:6-9. What do we read here about the basis of Christian hope?

Now focus on Haggai 1:2-11. What is Haggai's message about life's priorities? Are there different priorities in life lived with God at different times in our lives? How can we know if we are fulfilling our calling, and not just fitting God in around our own priorities?

The Message of Zechariah (if you have time)

Read Zechariah 1:1-6. How good are we at learning from the mistakes of the past? How can we help ourselves to be better learners?

Read Zechariah 4:6-10

What does Zechariah say to encourage the people of God?

What is the role of God's Holy Spirit in ensuring that the work is completed? Can you think of any practical experience of this in your own life?

Can you think of any examples in your own life when God has fulfilled a promise to you?

Why might it be detrimental to church life if we 'despise the day of small things'? (Zechariah 4:10)

Read Zechariah 8:1-12 (or even the whole chapter if you have time!)

How far has Zechariah's vision been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus? And are there greater things yet to come?

Prayer Focus Suggestion

Spend some time in quiet, remembering God's presence amongst his people, and listening for any words of encouragement that you can offer to others in your group – particularly at the start of this new year.

You might like to close your time of prayer using the prayer for the new year from Sunday's service (below). Or you might like to use some other prayer that would be suitable for your group at the start of 2021?)

God behind us in the past.

God before us, the way ahead.

God beside us in this moment.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

it's your Presence that we seek.

Lord, we lay our lives before you for 2021.

I am no longer my own but yours.

May your Presence fill me and empower us

For all that lies ahead in this season.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.