

RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 8: Ezra 5:1-10

INTRODUCTION

We have been through quite a journey exploring the book of Ezra. We are now in our eighth week looking at the events that occurred all those years ago, attempting to see what they have to say to us, as God's people, today. We are told by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 that 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' but I believe that the book of Ezra is *the* book for this time. It describes a people who are returning from exile to worship God once more, to repair their relationship with him, and to restore their identity as God's people. It is a book of new beginnings, and as a church seeking a way forward in light of the pandemic we are living through, we are beginning something new too.

Last time in Ezra we saw a second new beginning for God's people. The first was when they returned from exile in Babylon, this second new beginning was the recommencement of work on the temple which had stopped for 16 years because of the fear of the Jewish people. With a rebuke from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to remember who they were as God's people and who God was, the Jews overcame their fears and began once more to rebuild the temple, all done with the watchful eye of God keeping them safe (Ezr. 5:1).

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

This is where we pick the story up today. But, with every success story there is often opposition. This season, Liverpool Football Club have won the premier league title for the first time in thirty years and they have done so in magnificent fashion recording victories over every team in the league and winning the title with a record number of games still left to be played. All in all it was a remarkable season for them, yet there are those who belittle this achievement saying that COVID-19 and the subsequent adjustments to how matches are played has made their title win null and void, not a true victory in the way other teams have won the league. Success, like Liverpool's, attracts opposition and so it will not come as a surprise that as the temple work continued at pace it attracted the scrutiny of those in power over the region - the governors of the area west of the Euphrates, Tattenai, Shethar-bozenai and their associates (Ezr 5:3).

It is likely that any activity would have caught the attention of these governors. The Persian empire had been dealing with rebellions in many of their territories during this time and so any major construction project would have been scrutinised for fear that it may have been the beginnings

of fortifications and the seeds of rebellion. The governors asked the Jews two questions: firstly, whether they have permission to build the temple, and secondly what are the names of those who are building it. These responses were then sent off to King Darius to ascertain their validity (Ezr. 5:6-17).

This was the next test for the Jewish people. They had already stopped work on the temple once because of fear of persecution and intimidation - how would they fare against being questioned by the governors of the region? We all face challenges every day, perhaps not in the form of government questioning, but of one kind or another. It may be the challenge of staying in isolation when every fibre of your being wants to escape from the four walls of your house; it may be the challenge of making your furlough or pension payments stretch to provide food for the week; or it may be something deeper or more personal, the challenge of faithfully living out your life as one of God's people in a world that is opposed to so much of what we believe. When we take a moment to reflect on our day we will see we are all faced with challenges but it is in our response to these challenges that we see what our character is like.

It is no different for the Jews in Ezra's time and as we see in verse 5 they stood up to the challenge they faced and continued working on the temple. Yes, they had a bit of divine providence (the beginning of verse 5 tells us 'the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews' and so God was in control of the response of the governors) but the Jews still needed to overcome their own fears and respond faithfully to the challenge of such scrutiny from those who were in positions of power over them. We, as God's people today, can learn from how the Jews responded to their challenge faithfully. They responded in two ways: they were faithful to God's word and they persisted in their work. Consequently, the work on the temple prospered in their hands (Ezr. 5:8).

FAITHFUL TO GOD'S WORD

It is not immediately obvious to see exactly how the Jews were faithful to God's word during this time, we get no obvious mention to work being done "in accordance with the scriptures" but, as we saw in Ezra 3 when construction of the temple under Zerubbabel first began, the construction had always sought to be faithful to the methods of construction given by God to Solomon for the first temple. Here, after 16 years, when work recommences it is once again being done in accordance with God's instructions. Verse 8 speaks of the temple being built 'with huge stones, and timber laid in the walls,' the exact same methods used by Solomon's men in 1 Kings 6:36. With such a break from the construction of the temple it would

have been easy for the Jews to take shortcuts so they could catch up with construction and get the temple completed sooner or to rush the construction just in case the governors of the region change their mind in the future and tell them to stop construction before it is finished. The Jews could have felt the pressure to forsake the instructions given to them by God in preference for a quicker solution. They do not, however, fall foul to this temptation, instead, they ensure that the work is done properly and in accordance with God's instructions. At this time of challenge the Jews do not crack under pressure either from themselves or from those outside of God's people, rather they remain faithful to God's word.

Likewise, when we are faced with challenges we too must remain faithful to God's word. Having God's word readily available to us in our Bibles, written in our own language, with numerous translations, footnotes, and summaries in means it has never been easier for us to get to know who God is and what his call on our lives might be. I know that many of you are missing church services as we once had them with the intercessions and hymns and the fellowship that goes along with them but this time is an opportunity for us to dig deeper into God's word. It is the first time since I arrived in this benefice that we have consciously worked our way through an individual book of the Bible and explored the depths of what it has to say about God and ourselves. All too often we get caught up in the passages we know or the seasonal services and miss the treasure that can be found through a purposeful examination of God's word. I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon this morning the words that Paul sent to Timothy, that 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16); now there is so much that we can get from these words but for today I want to highlight that scripture is all of these things and more. Scripture teaches us, it challenges our behaviours, and it corrects us, all so that we might, as verse 17 goes on to say, 'be complete.' It is through following God's word that we become complete, that we become the people that God created us to be.

When we devote ourselves to God's word and remain faithful to it we are complete and so we are ready to respond faithfully to any challenges that might come our way. We will know the truth that God is with us, we will know the truth that he has provided a helper for us in his Holy Spirit, we will know the truth that death is nothing to fear because of Christ's death and resurrection. God's word can provide for us whatever challenges we might face, not necessarily in the way we might want it to or expect it to, but it will provide for us, so let us remain faithful to God's word.

PERSISTENCE AND PROSPERITY

The second thing we can learn from the continued work of the Jews on the temple in the face of the challenge from the governors of the region is that they were persistent in their activity, they did not stop. Ezra 5:8 says that work on the temple 'goes on diligently.' These would have been of great comfort for Haggai and Zechariah to hear after they managed to get construction underway again after that 16 year break. Where fear once was it has now gone. They may have been fearful before (Ezr. 4:4) but now they are steadfast in their work.

It is likely that the words from Haggai are still ringing in their ears with the truth that God was with them (Hag. 1:13) and so they had no reason to fear, no reason to stop the work that they were doing, God was with them. This is a truth that we can hold fast to today as well. Paul in his letter to the church in Rome reminds us that 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Rom. 8:31). It is a great reminder that God is with us now in all that we do and so we have nothing to fear in doing what we are called to. But the actions of the Jews are more than a reminder of God being with us, they show us that living a life for God is more than just knowing God, knowing his faithfulness, his grace, his mercy; it is about action as well. It is one thing to know God's word, it is another thing to act on that knowledge.

When challenged, the Jews continued to follow God faithfully and work on the temple. Likewise, when we face our challenges, we too need to be those who act in a way that is faithful to God. For example, we may know the truth of John 3:16, that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,' but do we live out this truth when times become hard? Do we love God for what he has done for us, even when we are belittled for our faith; do we seek to spend time with the God who loves us when our worries about our health occupy most of our thoughts; do we thank God for his provision and continue to give financially to his church even when faced with redundancy? Persisting to live faithfully with God when faced with challenges is difficult and it most likely won't solve all your problems either (it's not like the governors suddenly left once they'd met with the Jews, they were still hanging around!) But persisting in faith through those times will be beneficial.

The final words of Ezra 5:8 tells us that the work of the Jews on the temple 'prosper in their hands.' Following God's way can lead to nothing other than prosperity, not financially as some "prosperity gospel" preachers might say, but for the prosperity of God's kingdom, the prosperity of your relationship with him, and the prosperity of the work that he is doing through his people.

When we know God's word and act faithfully in response to it we are living a life that is closer to the life that God designed us for and therefore we are closer to living life to its fullest, closer to life as it should be. So I encourage you this week to think about the challenges that you face, to seek to know God in the midst of those challenges through his Word, and to live faithfully through those times because you will find support from God through the challenges of life and you will come out the other side with your relationship with God having benefited from the process and perhaps knowing his call on your life that bit better than you did before.

Amen.