

Study 2

Ezra 3: Building a House

When you return home from a long time away, what's the first thing you do? Check the mail? Make sure the dog hasn't died? For the Jewish exiles released by the Persian ruler Cyrus, what's important for them upon their return to their land? It's building a house - God's house. The temple. In Ezra 3 we'll see why building the temple is so important, but we'll also wonder – is building a temple really going to solve all their problems anyway?

Ezra 3 records the rebuilding of the altar (v1-6), then work commencing on the temple itself (v6-13). It's been 400 years since Solomon's temple was built. Since then it's been destroyed by the Babylonians. But what similarities can you see between Solomon's original temple and the construction of this temple?

Solomon's Temple	The returned exiles' temple Ezra 3	What is the similarity?
1 Chronicles 22:2-4 2 Chronicles 2:15-16	v7	
1 Kings 6:1	v8	
1 Chronicles 23:2-4	v9	
2 Chronicles 5:11-13	v10-11	

When you put it all together, the similarities are striking. It's not just pure coincidence. The returned exiles want to follow the pattern of how the first temple was built. Why do you think keeping the same pattern would have been important to these Jews as they re-establish their existence in the land?

It seems establishing links with the past was very important. Things are different from what they once were in the 'heyday' of King Solomon. They're small in number and at the mercy of Persia, the dominant foreign power. They have no king. Their very survival as a viable distinct people is under threat (v3). So in the face of all this, it was important to demonstrate that they are the one-and-the-same people of God who lived in the land before the exile. In doing things as they were once done, they are saying that God's people are back – they haven't disappeared and their intention is to return things to the way they once were.

In itself this intention is good, but from what we looked at last week with the history of Israel, if they simply go back to the way things once were, what's the great danger?

It's interesting to see the way the Old Testament talks about the temple. The temple was critical to the life of Israel. The temple showed that God lived amongst his people. The sacrificial system given by God was based at the temple. But at the same time, there are hints in the Old Testament that the physical temple located in Jerusalem is not the full picture.

Read Solomon's words at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:27-30. What perspective does Solomon give to this physical building?

Read Hosea 6:6. Hosea was one of the prophets who spoke of God's impending judgement for Israel's idolatry and for their pride of thinking that they can have all the religious set up, but ignore God in their hearts. What perspective does Hosea give to this physical building?

The original temple was a glorious building – located at the very centre of the life of God’s own people. God’s name rested on it. To approach God, the people approached the temple. But at the same time, this building could never house the God of the entire universe. And it seems that when you get down to it, God took no pleasure in empty religion that was happy to sacrifice animals, but paid no attention to really loving Him from the heart. This is why the Jews were sent into exile in the first place!

Just to add to this picture of the temple, we’ve seen the similarities... but what is the big difference between Solomon’s temple and this new temple being constructed by the returned exiles? v11-13?

Do you notice a sense of ambiguity when it comes to the temple?

This second temple isn’t as good as the first one. And as we’ve seen, just having the temple doesn’t guarantee blessing anyway. In the end what matters is that the people of God love Him with all their hearts and obey Him as He has always commanded (Deuteronomy 30:1-6 and Jeremiah 29:13-14 from last week). In the end, getting things right in Israel is going to require a transformation of the heart. But where will it come from?

Ezra & Jesus

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament makes lots of comparisons between the temple and Jesus. Read Hebrews 10:1-18.

How is the Old Testament system of law and sacrifices described in v1?

What’s the limitation to the temple sacrificial system compared to what Jesus did with his sacrifice? v8-14

The book of Hebrews uses the terms ‘old covenant’ and ‘new covenant’. Covenant means contract. It means the basis of relationship between God and his people. The old covenant was about the temple and animal sacrifices. The new covenant is about Jesus. According to v16-18 what is the great advantage of the new covenant with Jesus?

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, peoples' sin can be dealt with once and for all. There's no need to trot back to the temple every year. There's no need for the temple at all – we are forgiven! In fact, with the use of a quote from Jeremiah 31 (Heb 10:16-17), we are taught that through Jesus' sacrifice, the law is written on our heart so that we can at last love God from our heart. Reconstructing the temple building was a good symbol for the returning exiles - but it didn't change their hearts. It's only Jesus who reconstructs our heart so we can truly live for Him.

Notice the joy that the people express in Ezra 3:11-13 – "*He is good, his love to Israel endures forever*". It certainly is true! How has God's love been expressed to you?

We have even more reason than those people to be joyous, but what can stop us having joy in God?