

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Ezra 3-6: The Rebuilding of the Temple

If Ezra 1-2 is about the *return of the exiles*, Ezra 3-6 is about the *rebuilding of the temple*. The section provides an opportunity for us to reflect on what we might learn from the experience of the people of God *then* for ourselves as the people of God *now*. We can trace the account in four phases.

### 1. The Temple Construction Started: Foundation (Ezra 3)

Their first act was to build an altar on the original site where the temple had stood (3:1-3). We're then told in 3:4 that they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, which recalled their ancestors' experience in the wilderness, when they had to live in tents or huts, and when God remained faithful to them. They then began a full programme of sacrifices (3:5-6).

All this is highly significant. Even before the physical foundation of the temple is laid, a *spiritual* foundation of worship is laid. There are things to learn from the account about appropriate worship: it takes place when the people of God are gathered together, united as one (3:1); it is rooted in Scripture (we're told in 3:2 and 3:4 that it takes place in accordance with what is written); it is carried out in line with what was expected of them in terms of the regular sacrifices. Although Jesus has been offered as the final sacrifice, the New Testament is quite clear that we bring the sacrifice of our praise to God (Hebrews 13:15), and that we offer our own bodies as living sacrifices to him (Romans 12:1-2). Their first act was not to rebuild their walls, but to worship their God.

Chapter 3 then goes on to describe how the temple building starts. They move beyond building the altar to the temple itself, and lay the foundations, praising God as faithful (3:10-11). The end of the chapter is moving (3:12-13). It's not clear how we

should understand the weeping. Some elderly folk had lived through the exile; they remembered what the temple had been like, and their eyes filled with tears, possibly out of sadness because of all that had happened, but possibly also because of the sheer occasion of coming through God's judgment, and being kept by his faithfulness. Many can testify to a whole mixture of emotions looking back on their own spiritual pilgrimage. Even as we look back on our own history as a local church, we acknowledge that things have not always gone as they should, but we do so in the confidence of God's ongoing faithfulness to us.

Even so, chapter 3 reminds us that foundations are important. Before the shed is erected in the garden – before it even arrives – it is necessary to dig down, scrape out a space, fill in the hole with bricks and rubble, and lay stones on it, to make a base for the shed to sit on – a *foundation*. We need foundations – not just the kind made of stone, but the kind made of *worship*: the kind of worship that stands at the centre of our faith, the kind of worship that gets our focus on the right thing, the kind of worship that's carried out in line with God's word, the kind of worship that's done for God's greater glory. We may work on our church building as the years go on, but we dare not neglect building the church, through our worship of God.

So, the temple building starts. But it's not until 6:15 that it's completed, twenty years later. What happens? Why the delay?

### 2. The Temple Construction Halted: Opposition (Ezra 4)

Opposition rears its head, and it goes on for years (4:1-2). First of all, people come saying they worship God, but they were foreigners who had been resettled there by

the Assyrians. They did worship God, but they had added other gods to their cabinet. So the people of God refused their offer of help (4:3). There are times when separation is right, times when it is important to stand alone, especially when worship of God is at stake. Once Plan A didn't work, the opponents went to Plan B, which involved discouragement and intimidation (4:4-5). This lasted all the way to the time of Darius, a period of about sixteen years.

In fact, after the introduction of the opposition in 4:1-5, 4:6-23 describe ongoing opposition through the years that follow. Verse 24 brings us back to the story line, where we are told that work on the temple came to a standstill.

It's a needy reminder. Those who worship God and seek to do God's work may well meet with opposition, frustration and disappointments. Enemies of God's people will use different strategies: they might try to sneak in, as they did here at first; if that doesn't work, they might well turn to discouragement, slander, misrepresentation and intimidation. And the opposition might be ongoing, might even be relentless, might go on for years and years. If Ezra 3 offers us a great picture of the people of God laying a foundation of worship, Ezra 4 brings an important dose of realism: opposition will come.

### **3. The Temple Construction Resumed: Investigation (Ezra 5:1-6:12)**

Sixteen years go by by the time we get to chapter 5, and Darius has taken over from Cyrus as king. We know from Haggai's prophecy that faced with opposition the people lost heart, backed down, and concentrated on their own houses. As the years went by, it might have got easier to procrastinate about returning to rebuild the temple. But Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people to resume the building work (5:1-2).

Once they do start rebuilding the temple, local governors make investigations (5:3-5). Verse 5 nicely summarises what follows in

this section: Tattenai sends a letter to Darius the king (which takes up the rest of chapter 5), and Darius responds in 6:1-12. Darius investigates the royal archives, and discovers that Cyrus had originally given permission for the rebuilding to go ahead, so he allows it to continue, and even provides state funding for the project!

The temple was started again. It started with the preaching of God's prophets, with listening to the word of God, with a call to obedience, with a response to God's call. Above all, God's eye was on them (5:5). That was key, and that's where we must put our trust: not in ourselves, not in our cleverness, nor even in other people, but in God alone.

### **4. The Temple Construction Completed: Dedication (Ezra 6:13-22)**

They worked a further four years, and the temple was eventually completed in 516 BC, 70 years after it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (6:13-15)

The people then dedicated the temple and began to keep the sacrificial laws (6:16-18), worshipping (as in chapter 3) in accordance with what had been written. They celebrated Passover, remembering God's deliverance of them from Egypt centuries earlier (6:19-22).

The chapter ends with the affirmation that the Lord had made them joyful, by turning the heart of the king towards the people. And so the whole section ends as it started, reminding us of the importance of true worship of the Lord God: worshipping the Lord as one body of people; worshipping in line with the requirements laid down in his word; worshipping the Lord despite the opposition that might come our way; worshipping the Lord by celebrating our redemption (as we do when we eat bread and drink wine); worshipping the Lord with joy in our hearts. It was so for the people of God then; may it still be so for the people of God today, even for those of us who worship together at this place. To God's own glory. Amen.