



# Unlocking the Bible (21)



## Get Up and Go: Lessons from the Book of Ezra

In looking at the Book of Ezra we start a new, redemptive, phase of the nation's story. Following the dismal failures recorded in the historical books of Kings and Chronicles, and subsequent punishment by captivity, we now have three books - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther - that relate to the restoration process and new beginning.

This new beginning is facilitated by two factors. One is the providence of God working through earthly powers in ordaining circumstances that make it suitable for significant things to happen. In chapter 1, Ezra, records a decree from Cyrus commissioning the exiles to return to Jerusalem in order to see that city restored and the worship of God re-established. That same Cyrus also supplied them with goods and resources to help them in that task.

The second is the factor of human cooperation. The people eagerly responded to the decree and invitation to return. Judging from the list of those who returned they were representative of the whole nation: some of tribes, some of families and some as individuals. They are the ones whose "spirits have been stirred" by God so making this aspect of human behaviour the result of a response to Divine stimulus.

These people, "whose hearts God had stirred" gave willingly of their time, energies and goods for this important work. Once there, they set about "with great diligence" to restore the sacred places, beginning with the altar and proceeding to re-erect the Temple itself. It was a time of rejoicing and they gladly celebrated the Passover and sacrificed burnt offerings in the process. Everything was going very well.

But, in the second phase of the book the picture changes when, tragedy falls in the form of opposition. A protest letter was sent to Artaxerxes who immediately forbade any further work pending enquiries to corroborate the allegations made. The 'enemies of God' set about to frustrate the work of God.

But, it takes more than a decree to hinder the building. Initially, the work stopped and the building was left in a state of disrepair while the people concentrated on their own dwellings. But, challenged by the preaching of Haggai the prophet, who now appeared on the scene, the people were once again motivated to resume the work and so completed the rebuilding, much to the joy of the onlookers. The two forces were at work: divine providence and human endeavour; for, meanwhile Darius became involved along with Artaxerxes and when search was duly made the original decree was found and, as a result, approval for the work to resume was given as an impetus to completion. That search had also motivated Artaxerxes to realise the importance of this return and so he had commissioned Ezra the priest - an expert in the law - to go up to Jerusalem and make his contribution. By sensitively teaching the people he ensured that, alongside the physical artefacts of altar and temple, there was distinctive and appropriate behaviour in the form of dedication and holiness.

What lessons are there for us in this book? Surely, it emphasises - on the one hand - recognition of the sovereignty of God through the providential decrees that facilitate the fulfilling of His purpose. Complementing that is the essential response and commitment of those whose hearts are willing and who commit themselves wholeheartedly to the work of God. Sustaining that commitment and diligence is spurred on by the ministry of the Word and the personal devotion of those involved.

We shall see more of that in the next two examples in the books of Nehemiah and Esther.