

Sept 17-23

## **Week 38**

As we near the end of our reading through the Old Testament, we finally come to Act 2 scene 9, “Return: God Delivers His People Again.”

This week notice the references back to the exodus and the original vision for God’s chosen people, as well as to the failures of the Israelites prior to the exile in Babylon. Yet the tone of the writings this week takes a decided turn to hope for the future.

Notice the shift to very positive messages from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. These prophets, along with Ezra, focused on the theme of renewal of God’s people and the rebuilding of the temple. As we have seen in earlier prophets and historical writings, God’s judgment of his people in part included his departure from the temple in Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 10). Now God returned to live among his people as they learned to live in peace, truth, and righteousness.

We will also begin Esther this week, a story from the period of Persian rule, which deals with heroes God used to deliver the Jews from destruction. You will find the readings this week powerful and encouraging. As you read, watch for key themes we have seen earlier in the Old Testament, but whereas the curses of the covenant were in full play prior to and during the exile, blessing now predominates.

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## **Scene 9**

### **Return: God Delivers His People Again**

In this scene the world’s superpowers shift again. The Medo-Persians rise and grant the Israelite captives permission to return home. Ezra and Nehemiah become great leaders. No Davidic king reigns, but the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi speak for God. The second temple is built. Jerusalem gets new walls. God’s people (now called Jews) resolve to live by his laws. Esther acts bravely, keeping the Jews from extinction. World history will unfold as Daniel prophesied: Persia will fall to the Greeks; the Greeks will give way to Rome. Act 2 ends with us longing for the curtain to rise on the next scene.

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**Day 1**

**Read 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1-3**

**Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 1**

In 539 BC King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians, and the Persian king proclaimed an edict in 538 BC allowing the Israelites to return home to their ancestral land, fulfilling the seventy year prophecies of Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10.

In the first chapters of Ezra, the focus is on the restoration of the community of God's people. The extensive account of the people's returning in Ezra 2 points to the importance of ancestry, especially for service as a priest in the temple (see 2:62). In fact, the rebuilding of the temple stands at the center of Ezra and thus at the center of the identity of God's people. Exile had taught the Israelites that a God-centered life is the only viable life for God's people.

*What in your life communicates to those around you that you have a God-centered life?*

*How does God's new temple, the church, stand at the center of your identity?*

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## **Day 2**

### **Read Ezra 4-6**

#### **Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 2**

Most of the events in these three chapters took place from the time King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home from exile in 538 BC to the time when the temple was completely rebuilt under King Darius in 516 BC. This rebuilding was not without difficulty and delay. Local opposition brought the work to a halt for several years.

Our reading today focuses on perseverance in the face of opposition to a task given by God. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah enter the story, giving encouragement for the rebuilding. God also used the Persian government in the rebuilding process.

The climax of the section focuses on the dedication of the temple and the celebration of Passover. The Jewish people had not only returned to the land but had also fully returned to following the law of God.

*Do you ever face opposition in the tasks God has given you to do? Resolve today to persevere in the power of God.*

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## **Day 3**

### **Read Haggai**

#### **Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 3**

Our reading for today is unusually short but rich. The word of the Lord came to Haggai in the second year of the reign of the Persian king Darius (520 BC), about eighteen years after the exile had ended and the Jews had been allowed to return home. Haggai presented four brief sermons. The people had returned to Jerusalem but had gotten caught up in their own needs and neglected the temple, the Lord's house. In essence his message was "Get to work!"

Unlike the responses we have seen to the prophets before and during the exile, the people responded positively to Haggai's message. As you read, watch for this response and the results. God would now bless and live among them. Again we find the centrality of God's presence among his people as a theme. Haggai also emphasized the need for holiness and the importance of God-directed leadership. It is easy for us to get distracted from building up the Lord's house (today God's people), focusing instead on our own homes and lives.

*How can you sacrifice your time and resources to build up fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?*

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**Day 4****Read Zechariah 1-7****Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 4**

The prophet Zechariah, a contemporary of Haggai, wrote a rich, encouraging book that has several emphases. Those who had returned from exile would be blessed. God's presence was once again with God's people, and God would bless the work of the leaders in rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple. The nation's true King would return to Jerusalem and would be killed for the sins of the people. The events of Zechariah 1–7, which we read today, and of Zechariah 8, which we will read tomorrow, would happen in the near future.

Zechariah had eight night visions (see 1:7–6:15), filled with symbolic language. You will recognize that John used some of the language in the book of Revelation. Symbolic language is not easy to comprehend, but Zechariah often interpreted the symbols for us. Notice that God was reversing much that was broken during Israel's centuries of disobedience and was renewing the covenant with his people. Chapters 7–8 concern true fasting, which in essence is to live righteously and justly.

*If God is to bring renewal to our lives, he will lead us to live more carefully by his ways and values. How is renewal taking place in you at present?*

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**Day 5****Read Zechariah 8-14****Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 5**

Zechariah 8 presents a beautiful picture of renewal. God would return to Jerusalem and build up the city and the nation as the people learned to live in truth and peace. There would be peace and joy, and covenant blessing would cover the land. Israel would also fulfill its destiny in being a blessing to the nations. Do you see how these words fulfill promises made by God early in the Old Testament story (for example, Genesis 12:1-3)?

Zechariah 9–14 focuses on the future renewal that would take place when the true King came. Notice that 9:9 was fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem in what we call the triumphal entry (see Matthew 21:1-5). As a Shepherd, God provided salvation (see Zechariah 11). Notice the foreshadowing of other events in the life of Jesus, seen in Zechariah 11:12; 12:10; 13:7.

Ultimately, the prophet anticipated the very end, when “the Lord my God will come” and “will become King over the whole earth” (14:5,9), and all families of the earth will worship him.

*How might you and I participate in calling the nations to worship the Lord?*

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**Day 6****Read Esther 1-5****Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 6**

Esther presents us with a beautifully crafted court story of a moment in the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes, 486–465 BC). It focuses on four characters: the Persian king; Esther; Esther's relative, Mordecai; and the evil Haman.

Watch for rich ironies in the story. For instance, Esther's rise to the position of queen came because Queen Vashti did not obediently come when called by the king (see Esther 1:12). Esther's dilemma, however, was whether to approach the king without being summoned (see Esther 4:10-11). Some elements of this story shock modern sensibilities, but enjoy the story as a celebration of God's using unlikely heroes to deliver his people.

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**Day 7**

**Reading Summary for Week 38**

After the Persians defeated Babylon, they allowed various exiled peoples to return to their ancestral homeland. The people of Judah had finally given up their idolatrous ways. We have read in Ezra of the exiles' return and reestablishment of proper worship. Sacrifices were restored, and the temple, though much less grand, was rebuilt. They were spurred by the exhortations of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Back in Persia, God used Esther to spare the Jewish people from mass extermination.

**Prayer/Meditation**

Lord, sometimes you work in human affairs by sending active, vocal agents, like Haggai and Zechariah, who spur others on so that your purposes are accomplished. At other times you work quietly, like you did with the young Esther, who never even mentioned your name even though she was your chosen instrument. May I never shrink back from the calling you place on my life, for I too may be one you use "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Amen.

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