

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF EZRA

PART TWO – THE WORK BEGINS AND THE ENEMY ARE SOON ACTIVE –CHAPTERS 2-6

After 70 years of captivity in which the Jews have learned through Ezekiel and Daniel, and from God Himself, that they can have only one God, they are ready for new instructions. Their leader this time is not one of their own but a king, long promised, who will give them a clear command to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Cyrus, like Jesus, put his plan down on paper or stone, as well as proclaiming it publicly. Like Jesus he promised vast resources to accomplish the task but at the same time he encouraged them to support each other by willing giving to the work, not under any compulsion. There was a magnificent response both by those who made the journey to Jerusalem and those who stayed. This story is a beautiful foreshadowing of a healthy church in action.(1:1-11)

The next chapter is one of those catalogues of names and numbers which we tend to skip over as unimportant. We forget that every one of those names represents someone special to God, even if unknown to us. The first two names, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, will later figure in the books of Haggai,(Hag.1:1) and Zechariah.(Zech.3:1; 4:7) Some are listed in families, others are known by the cities in Judah from which they originally came. Most were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The priests were of the tribe of Levi. Some identified with the Jews but for the moment there were a number whose ancestry was uncertain. A priest able to use the Urim and Thummim,(Exod.28:30) would one day give them confidence. Most Christians know they belong to Christ but some still lack assurance they are His. They too need the Lord to give them confidence they are His children. The team included a choir of 200 so the workers would have music to lift and inspire them. This is still a great idea. When they arrived in Jerusalem many of them gave generously as families as Cyrus had urged them. First they found themselves somewhere to live in or around Jerusalem. Now they were ready for action.(2:1-70)

Building the temple was going to be a major project which would take quite some time. Jeshua and Zerubbabel began immediately with the altar on which they could offer sacrifices. Jeshua is the Old Testament equivalent of the name Jesus, The Lord Saves. He was the high priest. Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah and in the direct line of descent from David to Jesus.(Matt.1:12) Every Christian activity needs to begin at the cross where Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sin. The cross prepares the way for the Lord to live in us and be our governor. Fear of the world around them drove them to sacrifice first. It was the time of year for the Feast of Booths which reminded Israel that we are living in temporary accommodation on earth. Again their offerings were given freely from the heart. Now the work of building the temple could begin in earnest. As they worked there was a delightful oneness between the whole team. Much music accompanied their building. It reminded them that nothing worthwhile is built without God's goodness and loving kindness. Music brings rich emotion. There was much feeling, joy on the part of the younger ones and weeping by the older men who remembered the first temple and regretted what their idolatry had brought on the generation in between.(3:1-13)

Inevitably they had not been at work long before the enemy moved into action. His strategy seemed harmless, an offer of help. Aren't we all worshipping the same God? It seemed an attractive offer. Here is where wise leadership is so important. Overseers, Paul tells Timothy,(I Tim.1:3; 3:2) are to be able to recognise and refuse strange doctrine and to teach the truth. The next attack was a

campaign to cause fear and so discourage. Even while Cyrus was still king this was done but in the reign of a new king, Ahasuerus, the pressure stepped up. The enemies of the Jews wrote a letter to the king advising him to look up the records to see what trouble the Jews had been in past years. They had rebelled regularly against Nebuchadnezzar at every opportunity.(II Chron.36) Letting them rebuild their city walls would only invite rebellion again. Their commission from Cyrus had only been to rebuild the temple not the city walls. The Devil is a liar who will conveniently twist the truth. He is also the accuser who will constantly remind us of our past sin when it has already been forgiven.(Rev.12:9,10) The plan worked, the king's order was given and the work on the temple stopped.(4:1-24)

Fourteen long, fruitless years passed before two prophets were brave enough to be God's mouthpieces. Haggai and Zechariah simply went back to Cyrus' commission to build the temple of God. Zerubbabel and Jeshua listened and started work again. The local government officials asked them for their licence to build and reported them to central government. They recorded the names of the builders so that they could deal with the offenders when the order came back to do so. They reported too the answer the temple builders had given that they had a mandate from King Cyrus for their work, and what is more that he had promised to pay for the work!(5:1-17)

A new king, Darius, was by now ruling the Persian Empire. Once again instructions were given to look into the records. Sure enough there was Cyrus' proclamation. Past rebellion had been paid for by their 70 year sentence. They now had his commission and his promises. This was to be the new covenant, to build his temple with his resources. As Christians we can be intimidated by reminders of our past failure or remember instead how Jesus paid for our sin and gave us His Great Commission to build His temple, His church, with the unsearchable riches of His grace. The accusers of the Jews not only had their charge rejected but they were told to fulfil Cyrus' promise to pay for the work out of his resources. And so the work was completed. The temple was ready for the celebration of the Feast of Passover which foreshadowed the future work of Jesus Christ. It became obvious to all how God's people were uniquely different from the world around them. When we look to Him, not to our past, this will still be the case. Then life becomes exciting.(6:1-22)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What else do we know about Zerubbabel and Jeshua? How do their names and roles help us to understand the two secrets of effective Christian service? Why is it so important to know for sure that we belong to Christ? If we are uncertain, how can we know we are His? (ch.2)
2. Why is it important to have a real enthusiasm for Christian service rather than just a sense of duty? What produces such a passion for Christ's work? How can Christian music help or hinder tough tasks?(chap.3)
3. What strategies does the Devil still use today to try to stop Christian work? When do these tricks succeed?(chap.4)
4. How do Haggai and Zechariah defeat the enemy's plan? How does the same approach work today?(chap.5)
5. What is the difference between the Devil's accusations and the Spirit's conviction? How can we enjoy the latter rather than being discouraged by the former?(chap.6)