
Day 271 - September 28

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

The Meaning of Restoration

Completion of the Temple

Readings: *Zechariah 7:1-8:23; Ezra 6:14-22*

Reflections:

- Where Haggai was focused on the actual construction of the Temple, Zechariah has a more holistic focus on the development of the spiritual community of the people doing the work. He is there to encourage and help them grasp the spiritual meaning behind the work they are doing. At this time, things are still in pretty bad disarray. The temple has not been completed, the walls have not been rebuilt, the towns are not restored and the people's lives are still all over the place.
- This prophetic encouragement comes two years after Zechariah's eight-fold vision. It is motivated by a question about fasting. Zechariah's response is typical of the problem of people being religious rather than relational. The people want to know, "should I keep fasting?" Zechariah replies, "You are not fasting for me (the Lord) but for yourself." This is an important point to note. We create religion or become religious for ourselves. We do it because we like it and it has nothing to do with God. Religion is ultimately a self-projection that is at the core self-worship.
- God through Zechariah clarifies what God's heart is: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other." We oppress other people because we vilify them rather than empathize with them. We see them as getting what they deserve. Like Amos (5:15, 21-24) or James (1:26-27), the brother of Jesus, God is continually sending messages to his people that he doesn't care about religious stuff, but about true compassionate, relational stuff.
- So what was the problem? The people had closed themselves off from having relationship with God ("refused to pay attention," "stubbornly they turned their backs," "stopped up their ears." – these are all images of rejecting relationship with God). The people made their hearts as hard as flint or diamond so that they wouldn't listen to what God was trying to say to them. So God responds as we would: "When I called, they didn't listen and so when they called, I didn't listen!" They were only reaping what they

had sown. So God scattered them among the nations and the pleasant land became desolate. Here we see again a perfect illustration of the story of “what doesn’t work.” People’s hearts rejected God and everything external did nothing to change their hearts. As a result, it all goes badly. Their heart condition ended their relationship with God and their broken relationship with God left them outside of the blessing that comes with being in partnership with God.

- Zechariah then moves on to a series of encouraging prophetic images about the coming blessing of God:
 - God is jealous for his people;
 - The new community will be filled with the young and old;
 - “They will be my people and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God” – a picture of covenant faithfulness;
 - Creation will be blessed – fruitfulness and blessing rather than cursing.
- All of these encouragements are to motivate the people to not be afraid but to do the work God has given them to do. Many times we as his people need our perspectives shaped by God’s encouragement and perspective or we become fearful, discouraged and feel like giving up.
- God reinforces again the key to being his people: “Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts (maintaining justice); do not plot evil against your neighbor (vilify them) and do not swear falsely (misuse God’s name). I hate all of this.” God cares not about religion but relationships. He then declares that the fasts will not be a time to mourn (sad because I am burdened under a religious yoke) but joyful times because they will be in celebration of true relationship. This anticipates the coming of the partying King, the Messiah of the Feast, who will turn the time of fasting (the story of “what doesn’t work” that carries on until the time of John the Baptist) to the time of feasting (Jesus and from that point on).
- And so God summarizes it for the people: “Love truth and peace!” That says it all.
- The final prophecy of encouragement affirms again that God is ultimately passionate not just for Israel to be restored as a nation but more importantly that through Israel all the nations of the world to be blessed. The final encouragement is about God gathering all the nations of the world into his kingdom community through Israel. “In those days ten men from all the languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” How powerfully this will be fulfilled through leaders like Peter and Paul.
- This encouragement motivates the people to work hard and to complete the temple. In Ezra we see the record of the incredible celebration that the people enjoyed after completing this important task. Even though the temple is smaller and more humble,

still the joy is real as the priesthood is restored and the temple is reinstated. They party for seven days! The concluding line of this section demonstrates their own awareness of God's sovereign control of all things: "...the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." God is in control and the people knew it, even to the point of turning the heart of an unbelieving king so that he would help God's cause. This can encourage us as Christ-followers to know that if God is with us, who can be against us? God will help us complete everything he has called us to do!