

Ezra and Work (Ezra 3-5)

In 587 BC, the Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. They killed the leaders of Judah, plundered the temple before burning it to the ground, destroyed much of the city, including its walls, and took the cream of Jerusalem's crop of citizens to Babylon. There, these Jews lived for decades in exile, always hoping for God's deliverance and the restoration of Israel. Their hopes were heightened in 539 BC when Persia, led by King Cyrus, overthrew Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Cyrus issued a decree inviting the Jews in his kingdom to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and, therefore, their life as God's people.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, originally two parts of a single work, narrate crucial aspects of this rebuilding story, beginning with the edict of Cyrus in 539 BC. Their purpose, however, is not simply to describe what happened long ago out of antiquarian curiosity. Rather, Ezra and Nehemiah use historical events to illustrate the theme of restoration. These books show how God once restored his people and how people played a central role in this work of renewal. Ezra and Nehemiah were written to encourage the Jewish people to live faithfully even under foreign rule, so that they might be participants in God's present and future work of restoration.

Ezra and Nehemiah were called to restore God's kingdom, in the midst of a partially-hostile, partially-supportive environment. Today's workplaces are also partially hostile and partially supportive of the work of God. This encourages us to work out how our work may contribute to implanting God's kingdom in today's world.