

THE STORY CHAPTER 19

The Story so far ...

Cyrus was king of Persia and he decreed that Israel could return to the Land and should rebuild the temple. He returned the articles which Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple. Zerubbabel was appointed governor of Judah. He led about 50,000 people back home in 537. Their first order of business was to rebuild the altar – this was done by Joshua the High priest. Offerings were again brought. After that the foundation of the temple was laid, followed by the prescribed praises. Some wept, some rejoiced. We learn later that the weeping was because the older people saw that it wasn't ever going to be as glorious as Solomon's temple. The surrounding people did their best to discourage the building. They succeeded. The discouraged people stopped and the temple lay unfinished for about 16 years. Then Haggai started preaching and motivated them to start building once more. He pointed out the Lord's frustration that they were living in their "panelled houses" while the temple lay in ruins. When they started building again God gave them encouragement through Haggai. He reaffirmed that the long awaited Messiah would one day visit that temple. They were to keep building because, although the temple did not look like much, ultimately its glory would exceed that of Solomon's temple.

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. His message was also one of encouragement to build the temple. But he pointed out that the temple was actually a symbol of something much greater. Through Zechariah the Lord promised that Jerusalem would once more become great, that she would once more be filled with happy, prosperous people. Through the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, the people continued to work on the temple. They needed the encouragement. Once more they faced opposition. A letter was written to Darius the Persian king bringing it to his attention that the temple was being built. Darius searched the records and confirmed that it was being rebuilt on order of Cyrus, and actually stepped in to help with funding for the rebuilding.

Finally, 70 years after its destruction, in 516BC, the temple was completed.

1. Why did God rescue the Israelites again?

Way back in **Gen 12:1-3** God had made a promise to Abraham, that his off-spring would have the Land, which we now know to have been the land of Canaan, which is where the Israelites finally settled. When it became necessary to discipline his people, the discipline was always going to be only for 70 years – God promised that although they would be sent from their land, that they would return.

Why did God rescue them again? Because he had promised only 70 years, and because his over-riding promise was the one he made to Abraham.

When we accept Jesus, God promises to get us to the "Promised Land" – heaven. He may need to "exile" us in order to keep us on the right path, but we can have confidence in the promises of God. What God promises, He will do – getting to spend our eternity with God is guaranteed by God. And what He promises He will do.

2. In what ways have you seen or experienced the rescuing power of God?

This question could be seen as somewhat ambiguous. The context is God rescuing the people from exile – from his discipline – and bringing them back to the Promised Land. So strictly, I think the question has to do with what God has done to rescue us from our own folly. People who were backsliding experience events in their lives which come as a wake up call and bring them back to the Lord. It could be the faithful words of a friend, illness, some near disaster. But maybe people would have answered the question by giving a testimony of God's goodness in supplying needs or something like that. If that is the case, then ask them what effect did God "rescuing" have on them? Did it draw them closer to God? Did it allow them to see God's power in a new way? And how might they respond to those things?

3. What did the Israelites do to deserve the mercy they received?

You might start by asking for a definition of mercy, and a definition of the closely related word, grace.

Grace: **Getting** what I don't deserve

Mercy: **Not** getting what I deserve

We deserve punishment – in God's mercy we don't get punished

We don't deserve forgiveness – in God's grace we are given forgiveness

Even if people come up with the obviously correct answer – NOTHING – they need to explain their answer to show a grasp of those two concepts.

4. What reason does God have for being merciful to you?

The short answer is this: God has NO REASON TO BE MERCIFUL TO US. It is only God's LOVE for us that makes him to WANT to be merciful to us. His reason for being merciful is because for some reason God wants to enjoy intimacy with us. But wanting to enjoy intimacy with us was not enough. Justice demanded that because we had rebelled against God, we deserved to face the consequences, regardless of what God wanted.

So maybe the preferred question would have been: *Why is God ABLE to be merciful to you?*

Answer: because God loves us, and because He wants intimacy with us. But before God was able to be merciful, God had to deal with the consequences of our rebellion. This He did by himself bearing the consequences of our rebellion. And it is because Jesus died that God is now ABLE to do what he WANTS – to be merciful to us.

5. The Jews returned home to rebuild the temple, the dwelling place of God on earth. Why was it important for them to do this?

In the OT God's, presence was associated with a geographical location. When Solomon dedicated the temple you will recall that he recognised that no structure was big enough to contain God, but recognized God's grace in allowing His presence to be associated with a place. That was what God wanted to do – associate His presence with a place – and that was the way God went about doing things. And for them to worship God in the God prescribed way, they needed to rebuild the temple.

But God never envisaged that it would always being like that. When Jesus was talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, He told her that the time would come soon when location was no longer important because the time was coming when true worshippers would worship in Spirit and in Truth. But until that time came – and we now live in that era – worship took place in the God prescribed way – in the temple.

6. Where does God dwell on earth today?

Interesting question: Does God "dwell" on earth today? Can someone who is Spirit and omnipresent "dwell" anywhere? He is, after all, everywhere! So my facetious answer is: He doesn't!!!

But there are maybe two answers that we can look at:

Firstly, because God is omnipresent, he "dwells" "everywhere."

There is no place where God isn't.

Secondly, we could say that he "dwells" in us, his people so that when people see us, they form an opinion of what God is like. And of course we comprise the church. So whatever the church is like – how we, the church behave to each other, to outsiders – that is what people see God as being like. We represent God.