

re:turn

re:build

# re:new

re:envision

re:generate



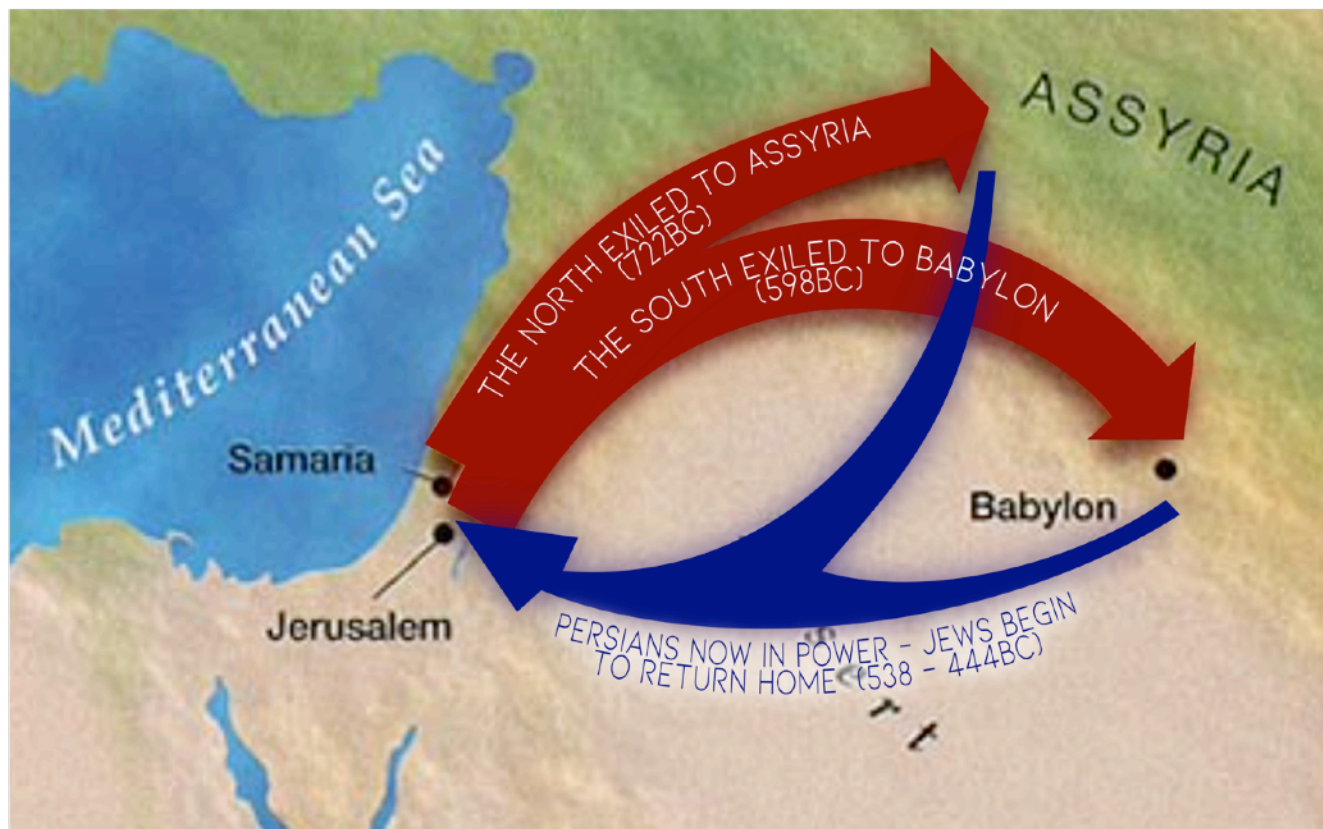




# context:

As we step into the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, the splendour of king David on the throne at around 1000BC, and Israel at the peak of its glory is a far-flung memory. It took until only 930BC (roughly) before civil unrest caused the nation to split into northern and southern kingdoms, and only a couple of hundred years later the Assyrians in all their pomp came and uprooted the northern 10 tribes from their land. Leaving the last two tribes in the south (Benjamin and Judah), a mere shadow of what they once were, it wasn't long before Babylon came to power and finished the job, taking the southern tribes into exile as well.

They are now a broken people subjugated to foreign rule and divorced from their home. And although Israel had brought this on themselves through their own unfaithfulness to Yahweh, God's promise was to bring them back when the time was right. His plan had always been to bring them home.



# it's easy as one, two, three, four...

## one story

Although we read it in our Bibles at two separate books, Ezra-Nehemiah is really one book that tells one story. Moreover, there's actually 3 protagonists, and poor Zerubbabel doesn't get a book named after him!

## two prophets

The two prophets that accompany this period in history are Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai's prophetic word was strongly focused on the rebuilding of the temple, straight to the point! Zechariah however had some more wild visions to contend with, but as Haggai's contemporary he still has a powerful message for the time and spoke straight into their situation. Well worth reading these books alongside the first few chapters of Ezra (esp Chapter 5!)

## three returns

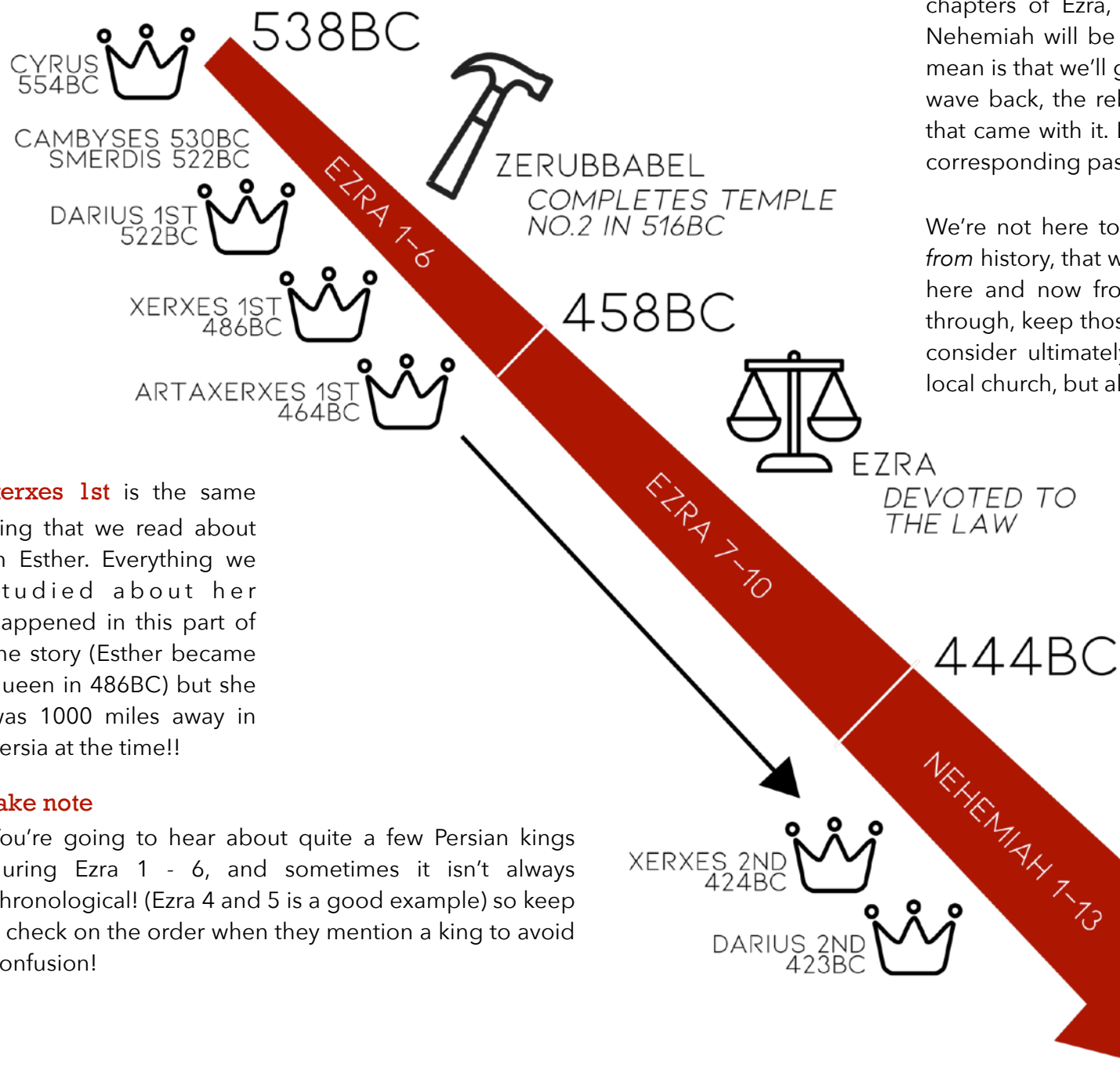
Each of the three protagonists of the story, **Zerubbabel** (538BC), **Ezra** (458BC) and **Nehemiah** (444BC) are all markers for each of the three journeys that fresh remnants of Israel made out of exile to return back to the promised land. For Zerubbabel it was about **rebuilding the temple**, for Ezra it was about **reinstating the Law**, and for Nehemiah it was about **rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and social reform**.

## four themes

There are tonnes more themes you could dip into, but just a few to look out for:

- The sovereign hand of God - he can move even the heart of a pagan king.
- Despite being a fragile remnant of the past, they are still the chosen people, chosen by God Almighty himself!
- Prayer and worship in humility is seen throughout, and is a catalyst for all that takes place, as well as for the 'new thing' to be birthed.
- It wasn't the same as what the stories of their forefathers described, not by a long stretch! But if it's a new thing that God's driving, then it can only be the very best story to step into!





**xerxes 1st** is the same king that we read about in Esther. Everything we studied about her happened in this part of the story (Esther became queen in 486BC) but she was 1000 miles away in Persia at the time!!

### take note

You're going to hear about quite a few Persian kings during Ezra 1 - 6, and sometimes it isn't always chronological! (Ezra 4 and 5 is a good example) so keep a check on the order when they mention a king to avoid confusion!

Between now and Easter we'll just be looking at the first 6 chapters of Ezra, which ironically means that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah will be making an appearance just yet! What it does mean is that we'll get a good look at Zerubbabel who led the first wave back, the rebuilding of the temple, and all the challenges that came with it. Below is the breakdown of the weeks, and the corresponding passages.

We're not here to simply learn history though, but rather learn *from* history, that we might grasp what God has to say to us in the here and now from His stories of the past. So as we journey through, keep those 4 themes on the previous page in mind, and consider ultimately what God might be leading us into as His local church, but also as His Church, His body of Christ, His Bride.

# week one: what can happen when God births a vision...

**Read:** Ezra 1-2

## **Questions:**

- What were some of your highlights from Sundays talk? What particularly spoke to you, encouraged or challenged you? Any questions you might have had?
- What do you think it means that God '*stirred the heart of Cyrus*' and why is that significant? What might that teach us about God?
- Ezra 1:4 echos the story of the Exodus, when the Israelites left Egypt and their neighbours gave them gold and silver and supplies for their journey. Why would this have felt significant to the Israelites at the time?
- Why do you think it might be significant that Cyrus returned the items that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Lord's temple?
- In chapter 2 - why is the long list of names important? Have there been points over the last year where you've perhaps counted yourself out, felt insignificant? Why are each of us and the roles we play absolutely vital?
- Imagine the long journey back for the Israelites, some full of vision, others bruised by exile... Are there any names in our church family that come to mind that you feel might need your encouragement this week?

## **Response:**

It's clear from chapter 2 that to God every name counts, every name and role is significant. Do you see your presence among God's people as significant as we look to new chapters of God's story in our parish, and do you believe that you have a role to play? Why/Why not?

# week two: the priority of worship

**Read:** Ezra 3

## **Questions:**

- What were some of your highlights from Sundays talk? What particularly spoke to you, encouraged or challenged you? Any questions you might have had?
- What did the Israelites build and do before they began building anything else? Why is this significant? And why do you think it's key that they assembled with a unified purpose?
- Why do you think they build the altar of sacrifice before any other part of the temple? What can this teach us about what worship requires?
- Why do you think *'many of the older priests, Levites and other leaders... wept aloud when they saw the new Temple's foundation'*? Read Haggai 2:1-9 and Zechariah 4:8-10 and discern whether or not this was a right response for the elders to have to the new Temple? Why, why not?
- The Israelites celebrated and praised God at every step. Before the foundation had even been laid they were worshipping and offering sacrifices and then when the builders had completed only the foundation of the Temple they sang and gave thanks. How does this challenge you in this season? How can we celebrate more of what God is doing, even seemingly the small things?

## **Response:**

Have you prioritised worshipping God in your own life recently? What has that looked like?

Spend some time together praying that God would give us the hearts of true worshippers, that our greatest desire would be to glorify Him in all things! Perhaps spend some time singing a worship song together.

# week three: no blessing goes uncontested

**Read:** Ezra 4:1-5

## **Questions:**

- What were some of your highlights from Sundays talk? What particularly spoke to you, encouraged or challenged you? Any questions you might have had?
- Why do you think Zerubbabel, Joshua and the other leaders reacted so strongly to the offer of help? What might have been their reasons for refusing? In the next few verses, how do we see that they may have been right to say no?
- Have there been blessings in your life that have come after great, possibly years, of discouragement? What kept you going before the blessing came and what has it taught you?
- Why do you think no blessings go uncontested? What do you think are the blessings that are going to or are already coming out of this season for the Church?
- As we look to the future as a parish, with changes to come and new chapters to be written, new things... what are some of the things the enemy could do to disrupt or discourage? How should we respond?

## **Response:**

Spend some time naming some of the blessings God has given you over your life and then thank and praise Him that each one of those blessings goes uncontested.



# week four: the power of the prophetic

**Read:** Ezra 5:1-5

## **Questions:**

- What were some of your highlights from Sundays talk? What particularly spoke to you, encouraged or challenged you? Any questions you might have had?
- Read Haggai 1-2:9 and Zechariah 4:6-10. Why do you think Haggai and Zechariah's prophecies are so key for the Israelites? Have you had anyone share a really timely prophetic word or powerful preach that has challenged/encouraged you to keep going?
- How does God rebuke the Israelites through Haggai's word in Haggai 1:2-4? What was it that the Israelites were doing wrong and what was their excuse? What does God then call them to do in Haggai 1:7-8? Is there any 'work' God has called you to that you may perhaps have let slip as a priority in this season?
- What else does Zechariah remind them of, what courage do his words stir?
- God raised up prophets who not only prophesied and showed them where they needed to reorder their priorities, but were with the Israelites and helped them, as they began to rebuild the temple. How can that speak to and encourage us today as a Church as we seek to return to our gatherings?
- How did the answer the elders gave to Tattenai show real wisdom? (vv.11-17)

## **Response:**

Spend some time praying for and listening to God for one another (perhaps in two's or three in breakout rooms) and then encourage one another with these words/pictures/scriptures and pray them over each other.

## **Haggai 2:9**

*'The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. And in this place I will bring peace. I, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, have spoken!'*

## **Zechariah 4:8-10**

*'Then another message came to me from the Lord: "Zerubbabel is the one who laid the foundation of this Temple, and he will complete it. Then you will know that the Lord of Heaven's Armies has sent me. Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand."*

# week five: no word of God will fail

**Read:** Ezra 6:13-22

## **Questions:**

- What were some of your highlights from Sundays talk? What particularly spoke to you, encouraged or challenged you? Any questions you might have had?
- In Ezra 6:14 we read that the Israelites *'were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah'* and the temple was finally completed! What does that tell us about why God sent these prophets and the importance of their role?
- In Ezra 6:22 it says *'There was great joy throughout the land because the Lord had caused the King of Assyria (King Darius) to be favourable towards them, so that he helped them to rebuild the temple of God, the God of Israel.'* How does this parallel with the beginning of the temple being rebuilt in Ezra 1:1? God stirred the heart of two pagan kings and used them to bring His work to completion. What does that tell us about our God and how does that encourage you personally today?
- We find our Church in a weird season - but we believe God is still in the process of building His Church until one day when He brings it to completion. How does this passage encourage you in this truth and excite you about the joyful celebration that will take place when God's Church reaches completion and we meet Him face to face?
- This chapter, and part of the story, closes with a celebration of Passover, perhaps the most significant festival of them all for the Jews... think over the significance of that story to the people of God... and their return from exile (remember the link to Egypt back in chapter one, God's provision - 1:6)... and as we approach Holy Week as a church... why do we remember 'passover' with even greater poignancy than the Jewish nation?

**Response:**

Take some time to celebrate and give thanks for where you have seen God bring breakthrough and His word remain true in this season.

Share some of the words God has given you, that you are yet to see brought to completion. Spend time praying together that you might see breakthrough in these areas and thank Him that no words He speaks ever fails!