PROPHET HAGGAI AND PROPHET ZECHARIAH

Persian kings as instruments in Yaweh's hands

The prophecies of the prophets came true. The Babylonian empire was destroyed by new coalition of the Medes and Persians. The victory of Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC was welcomed by the downtrodden people of the Babylonian empire. The Jews saw the hand of God and their prophet's words fulfilled in the coming of Cyrus and he did not disappoint them. Unlike the Assyrians and the Babylonians, Cyrus ruled with tolerance and kindness. In 538 BC he allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. Now they could rebuild the Temple. Cyrus even subsidized the cost of the rebuilding and sent back all the Temple vessels confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar. The Jews saw Cyrus as their savior.

Initial excitement slowly diminishes

Not all was well with the returning exiles. One of the outstanding leaders under whom the return and restoration took place was Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. The people took several months to settle down; most had to face the problems of finding somewhere to live and restoring their badly neglected land to a good state before they could think of rebuilding the Temple. After sometime when the people began the rebuilding of the new Temple's foundation, their zeal diminished. The local residents and few others began to show their displeasure at the return of the exiles. Even the neighboring groups did all they could to hinder the repair work. A further setback came from several years of poor harvests which the settlers had to contend with. So the people began to discuss whether this was the time to rebuild the Temple and the general feeling was that they could not afford to do it just now. So over the next eighteen years nothing was done. The community became dispirited to keep going. The bright hopes and the high expectations of the early days vanished.

Prophets Haggai and Zechariah correct the people's priorities

About this time, approximately 520 BC, two new prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, started speaking out. They knew that the community had become depressed and disheartened and that if the people were to survive, they had to get back their confidence in God. Some of the returned exiles had been so concerned to get land for themselves and build up their own estates that they had left the Temple building on one side as of matter of low priority (Haggai 1:4, 2:15-19). Haggai could see that they had lost their community spirit. He challenged them to put God first in their lives and explained that the difficulties they experienced were a punishment for concentrating on their own houses while God's house still lay in ruins (Haggai 1:4). He encouraged them to hope that the completion of the Temple would turn the tide, so that great blessing would come on the community (Haggai 2:1-9).

Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways! "You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not

enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways! "Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the LORD. "You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the LORD of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. "Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. "I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands." – Haggai 1:3-11

The prophet Zechariah began his mission only a few months after Haggai. He confirms Haggai's messages after a series of visions he receives from God, in which he became convinced that the rebuilding of the Temple was of utmost importance for a true revival of the community. Chapters 1-8, Zechariah recorded his visions, encouraged the people to reinstate the priesthood, and other religious laws that were forgotten during the 70-year exile. Encouraged by the prophets, the company of returned exiles took fresh heart. With a new sense of motivation, in 520 BC the building of the Temple was recommenced by Zerubbabel. Four years later, in 516 BC it was last finished. The new building was dedicated with great ceremony and rejoicing. It drew all the people together, the priesthood was reorganized and strengthened and now formal worship in the new state could really begin.

Once the Temple was rebuilt, it provided the much required focus for the revival of the entire nation. In 458 BC, the priests Ezra came to Jerusalem to spearhead a revival of the cult basing himself on the book of the law of Moses. In 445 BC, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the Jews rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

By and large there was desire to remain faithful to God's law and pattern their entire lives according to it. Judah never again really existed as a fully independent nation, nor did it have its own king, to hold it together. But the rebuilding of the Temple and the work of Ezra and Nehemiah strengthened the people's send of identity and gave them a focus to revive as a nation. The people had a sense of true community that God wanted them to be and began to expect the Saviour that would finally put a complete end to their problems. That hope was possible to be fulfilled only in Jesus.

Reflection:

1. Think of your own life. What evidence do you have to prove that God is really given the first place in your life?
2. What are the ways that you can set the right priorities – by giving God the first place in your life?