

Life Lesson 96

Ezra

Text: Ezra

Introduction

We have learned about the kings of Israel and Judah from the books of Kings and Chronicles. Some of those kings were good, but many were bad. At last the wickedness of God's people was so great that God allowed the Assyrians and the Babylonians to take over the land He had given His people. Those who weren't killed were taken away as captives.

Do you think God forgot all about His people? No, I'm glad to say that God never forgets His own. Even though He had to punish them, He was watching out for them and caring for them in that far-away land of Babylon.

The Story

The Israelites settled down to live in the land of their captivity. Some of them were happy there. They built homes and businesses and made friends with the Babylonians. There were some, though, that didn't forget their God or their land. They wanted to go back so that they could worship God in the way He had commanded.

How could they go back when a heathen king held them captive? The Assyrians and Babylonians who had conquered the Israelites were conquered by the Persians, but a heathen king was no problem for God to manage. We don't know exactly how God worked on his heart, but we know that Cyrus, the Persian king, made a decree that must have surprised and delighted the faithful Israelites in Babylon.

“The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth,” Cyrus announced. “Now He has commanded me to build him a temple in Jerusalem. Who wants to go back to Israel to build it?”

Of course the faithful Jews were happy to volunteer. Many of the Israelites still stayed in Babylon. Some liked it there and didn’t want to go back. Others like the prophet Daniel wanted to go back but were too old to make the trip.

The leader of the group going back to Jerusalem was a godly man named Zerubbabel. His name means “coming from Babylon” so we think he must have been one of the Israelites who were born in captivity in Babylon. Zerubbabel was appointed to lead the people back and to be their governor.

How happy the Israelites must have been as they returned to their home! They had gone out empty-handed and as slaves. They returned as free men with a load of treasures given by King Cyrus to use to rebuild God’s temple.

Can you imagine how you would feel to go back to your home after a long time away and to find it burned and broken down? That’s how the Israelites must have felt as they came back to Jerusalem. The city that had once been strong and beautiful was now just a ruin. Nevertheless, they were happy to be back. They dug around until they found the place where the temple had been. They found some stones and made an altar. The very first thing they did was to offer sacrifices to God.

The people built houses to protect them during the winter. When spring came they started right on the building of the temple.

It's not always easy to work for the Lord. When we are serving Him the devil will send someone to try and distract us. That's what happened to the Israelites. The people who lived around Jerusalem weren't happy to see them rebuilding the city. They tried to stop the work every way they could. First they offered to help! That doesn't sound very bad but to have the wrong people helping for the wrong reason can be the quickest way to fail in our work for the Lord.

"We all worship the same God," their enemies told them. "We want to help you build the temple."

"No, we don't worship the same God," Zerubbabel answered. "And we don't need you to help us. God told us to do it and that's what we'll do."

The devil uses the same tricks today. Often people will say, "We all believe in the same God. We just call him Mohammad or Buddha, or something else."

That isn't true! They aren't really worshipping the true God at all. It's just a trick to keep us from our true work. We should be wise like Zerubbabel and have nothing to do with them. When the enemies saw that they couldn't trick the Israelites, they were angry. They had hoped they could work with the Israelites and slow them down. Now they tried to do everything they could to bother the Jews and keep them from working.

At last the foundation of the temple was laid. Everyone was excited. Some people cried for joy to see the temple being built. Others were old enough to remember the beautiful temple Solomon had built. They knew this temple would be nice, but far less beautiful and glorious than the one they remembered.

By that time another Persian king was ruling over the Babylonians. The enemies made another crafty plan. They sent a message to King Artaxerxes.

“We thought you should know that a group of rebels are rebuilding Jerusalem,” they wrote. “If you don’t do something about them they will start fighting against you.”

Artaxerxes believed them and ordered the Israelites to stop working. They were so discouraged about the temple that they didn’t try to start work again when yet another king came to power. But God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to preach to them and encourage them. The people repented and again began to work on the temple.

Their enemies tried the same trick again. They sent a letter to the new king, Darius. Darius checked and found out that King Cyrus had given the Israelites permission to build the temple, so Darius let them go ahead with their work.

Another king, also named Artaxerxes, made another decree. He announced that any of the other Jews who wanted to go back to Jerusalem could leave. Many who were too young or for some other reason couldn’t leave before, were happy to pack up and head back to Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes gave them treasures to use in building the city and for beautifying the new temple. A man named Ezra was the leader on this trip.

Ezra was a scribe, one who copied and taught God’s law. He had prepared his heart before the Lord and wanted more than anything to teach God’s Word to the people living in Jerusalem. Ezra started off the trip in the right way. He had the people camp and spend some time in fasting and prayer, asking for God’s protection.

“We have a dangerous journey ahead of us,” Ezra told the group of travelers. “There are many people who have heard that we are carrying treasure and would like to rob us. I could have

asked the king for soldiers to protect us, but I would have been embarrassed to do that since I told the king that God would take care of us. Let's ask God to give us a safe journey."

So God did give them a safe trip back to Jerusalem. They were so happy to get there! Their joy soon turned to sorrow, though. The enemies who had plagued the Jews all along had found a way to stop them from serving God. Many of the Israelite men had married heathen women. Those women worshipped other gods and soon had their Israelite husbands worshipping idols, too.

Ezra was so upset that he cried. He cried and prayed to God that the Lord would forgive the people. Soon the people began to be ashamed of what they had done. They repented and cried over their sins, also.

Ezra stood up and preached to them. "You have sinned by taking these strange wives and by making friends with the enemies of God. Repent and put away these heathen women and have nothing more to do with those ungodly nations," he told them.

The people did as Ezra told them.

So in the book of Ezra we have learned about two trips from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel led the first group and helped restore the temple. Ezra led the second group and helped restore the people. God used both these men to help conquer the enemies of God's people.

The Life Lesson

There are still plenty of enemies of God's people around today. There are people who try to compromise God's servants. Others ridicule them. Others try to defeat them by ungodly

friendships and influences. God wants you to be a brave rebuilder like Zerubbabel and Ezra. We must stand against our enemies and work diligently as they did.

Review Questions

What happened to the wicked Israelites who wouldn't obey God?

God finally allowed them to be carried away as captives by the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

What Babylonian king declared God had told him to let the Israelites return to build the temple?

Cyrus

Who led the first group back to Jerusalem?

Zerubbabel

How did the people living around Jerusalem try to slow down the work on the temple?

They offered to help.

What else did the people do to try to get the Israelites into trouble?

They sent a letter to the new king Artaxerxes and said the Israelites were planning to rebel against him.

Who led the second group of Israelites back to work on the temple?

Ezra

Why did Ezra cry when he got back to Jerusalem?

The first returning group had given up on building the temple and had gone back to evil ways.

Did the people repent when Ezra preached to them?

Yes.