

## What's the Message - Lesson 82

Our study this time gives us a closer look at the role of a very special priest – Ezra.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is that you would learn the same lesson the returning exiles had so much difficulty in learning, namely, to trust God fully and obey Him in every matter. Amen.

Our two previous lessons have provided us with some of the historical background the exiles faced with their return to Jerusalem. We have told you how they started well, but their enthusiasm faded into the background when faced with obstacles and challenges.

Foremost among those obstacles was the opposition by the Samaritans, descendants of the people relocated by the King of Assyria into the territory of the Northern Kingdom of Israel when it was destroyed. In Ezra, chapter 4, verse 5, we read: *They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus . . . down to the reign of Darius, King of Persia.*

Only by the urging of God through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah did they manage to get their priorities straight – for awhile, at least. And work on the rebuilding of the temple began again. But this time, the governor of the region, a man by the name of Tatteni, sent a letter to Darius questioning whether the Jews had the authority to do this building, and asking him to do a search of the royal archives to see if such a decree actually existed. As we read in chapter six of the book of Ezra, not only was the decree of Cyrus found, after reading it king Darius instructed Tatteni – along with a very stern threat of death if he did not do so – to assist the Jews in every way they needed help. And to top it off, this expense was to be borne by the treasury of his region.

Now they could really set to work on the temple, and in four years it was completed. With the temple rebuilt, and worship restored, you would think they were ready to resume the covenant task that God had called them for. Instead, they slowly reverted to their pre-captivity ways. Oh yes, they had greatly improved regarding their worship of false idols. But they still managed to slip away from the full obedience to God that we would have

expected. Gradually they began to take wives from the local people, which led to a contaminated mixture of religion. They forgot how to speak Hebrew, and Aramaic – the language of Persia – became the common tongue. It was this environment into which Ezra, a priest and descendant of the line of Aaron, came. He did so with the permission and blessing of the new king of Persia, King Artaxerxes, a man who clearly held Ezra in high regard.

As we read in chapter seven, the king also gave Ezra a letter authorizing him to obtain silver and gold from the king's treasury, from his advisors, from the province of Babylon, and from the province governed by Tatteni. Ezra was also instructed to establish a judicial system to provide justice to all who lived in the region.

Ezra's response to these commands is seen in the final words of chapter seven: *Praise be to the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended His good favor to me before the king and his advisors and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*

But Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem was not until 60 years after the completion of the temple. And a lot of deteriorating in the lives of the Children of Israel had happened by that time. The first thing that hit Ezra hard in his face is recorded in chapter 9: *The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring people with their detestable practices . . . and have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.*

Ezra's reaction to this discovery was quick and stern. His words are: *When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me*

*because of the unfaithfulness of the exiles.* At the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra prayed to God on behalf of the people, beginning with these words: *O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.*

And with that, Teacher, we have the historical background and setting for the first major act of Ezra in Jerusalem. But what does all this mean to us today? Teacher, what's the message for us here?

First, after reiterating the blessings of God to Israel, Ezra's prayer admits that punishment by being exiled in Babylon was justly deserved for not obeying Him. Then he concludes with these words: *Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the people (you told us to avoid)? Would you not be angry enough to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?*

A large crowd of people had gathered around Ezra as he prayed, and they realized they had broken God's commands again, and they wept and confessed their unfaithfulness. *Then Shecaniah . . . said to Ezra, we have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women . . . now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children . . . Let it be done according to the Law.*

And so it was done. A hard thing to do? Yes. A cruel thing to do? Yes, it might well seem so. Wasn't this an extreme overreaction by Ezra? Perhaps not in this situation.

But how can this apply to us? Look at it this way: What is the lesson Ezra is teaching the Israelites? Is it not found in the original covenant God made with Abraham? It is a point we made repeatedly in our study of Genesis, and saw it again and again in the history of the Children of Israel. God can be trusted to be faithful and good to His people. He rightfully expects the same in return. Israel had broken God's law time and time again, until finally God punished them severely.

Could they not see the relationship of cause and effect? Ezra was impressing upon them that if you continue to disobey God completely, He will punish you again.

This is a message of Law, not Gospel. But, humanly speaking, it was what Israel needed at this point in their history if they were to survive as a nation, and fulfill their calling to be a blessing to all peoples. We can rightly claim that we are children of the Gospel, but we still are under the tension of the Law. Dare we disregard God and blatantly break His commandments, or do we respond to His love and mercy, with our love and obedience?

Next time we shall learn more of the importance and significance of Ezra.