

In our last lesson, we talked about the first group of people allowed to return to Jerusalem. They were also told to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel was their leader and the governor of Judah.

As we take up our story today, 50 years have passed since the temple was rebuilt. The Medo-Persian Empire still ruled the world. There was a new king who reigned in Persia. His name was Artaxerxes I.

There was a man named Ezra. Ezra was a priest and a scribe. Ezra was very skilled in the Law of Moses. (Ezra 7:6) The scribes were very smart men. They made hand-written copies of the scriptures. The scribes wrote every word that had been given in the Law of God.

Ezra was not only a scribe. He was a man who had set his heart on teaching God's Law. (Ezra 7:10) Ezra wanted to know the Law of the Lord. Ezra studied the Law. Ezra obeyed the Law. Ezra would not have been a good teacher if he was not being an example of the Law. What Ezra wanted more than anything was to teach the Law of the Lord to the people of Israel.

Ezra was in Babylon. He asked King Artaxerxes if he could go to Jerusalem. That was where God wanted Ezra to go. (Ezra 7:6) There was also a group of Jews who wanted to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission to go. He wrote a letter giving Ezra authority to return to Jerusalem. The king was allowing him to set up people to govern Israel. He was also allowing them to teach the Law of the Lord. King Artaxerxes gave Ezra silver and gold to buy animals to use for making sacrifices to the Lord. Although the temple had been rebuilt 50 years before, some of the silver and gold was to be used to make the temple more beautiful.

Ezra knew the Lord had touched the king's heart. Ezra gave thanks to God. The hand of God truly was on Ezra.

Ezra gathered all the Jews together at the River Ahava to get ready for their journey to Jerusalem. (Ezra 8:15) Ezra saw there were no Levites in the crowd. Ezra asked several men to find Levites to go with them to serve in the house of the Lord. Ezra prayed that God would take care of them on their journey. God heard the prayers and answered them. (Ezra 8:23) It took them almost 4 months to travel to Jerusalem. God kept them safe on their journey.

When Ezra arrived at Jerusalem, he was very sad at what he found. Some of the people were not following God's commandments. The Gentiles had moved into the land when the children of Israel were taken captive. The Gentiles worshipped idols and did not worship God. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, some of them married Gentiles. This was not what God commanded them to do. (Ezra 9:1-2)

God had caused the children of Israel to be in captivity because of their sins. They had returned to Jerusalem and were disobeying God again.

Ezra was so surprised when he heard about the sins of the people. Some of the people who were faithful to God started to gather around him. (Ezra 10:1) Ezra knew God had always been there to help the children of Israel. Ezra was crying and praying, confessing the sins of the people.

As Ezra continued to pray for the people. The crowd around him grew larger. Ezra taught the people the Law of the Lord. The people listened to Ezra. The people believed the words he spoke. The people cried. There was a man in the crowd named Shechaniah. Shechaniah told Ezra that they knew they had sinned against God. He asked Ezra to help them make things right with God. (Ezra 10:4) The people listened to all Ezra had to say. They repented of their sins.

The people made a promise to follow the commandments of God. (Ezra 10:12) God was working his plan for Jesus to come. It was still about 450 years before Jesus would be born.