

The Providence of God in the Life of Ezra

by Bryan Gibson

For an Israelite who lived under the law of Moses, no finer words could be said of a man than were said of this man: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

In the 7th year of King Artaxerxes (ca. 458 B.C.), Ezra led a group of Jews on a fourth month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6-9). About 1700 men took this trip, along with their families (Ezra 8:1-20). That God helped them on this journey is indicated by the repeated use of the phrase, “the hand of the LORD,” and other slight variations (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Here are three specific ways God helped Ezra and his fellow-Israelites.

God helped provide them servants for the house of God (Ezra 8:15-20). Ezra noticed that among the group set to return there were no sons of Levi, and so he commanded certain men “that they should bring us servants for the house of our God” (Ezra 8:17). Servants were brought, and while human effort was certainly involved, Ezra attributes this provision to “the good hand of our God upon us” (Ezra 8:18).

God guided them on their journey to Jerusalem and protected them from harm. Traveling without an armed escort, they prayed to God for help and protection, and He answered their prayer (8:21-23). “And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road” (8:31).

We don’t know all the means He used, but in some way God influenced King Artaxerxes to provide the Israelites all the assistance they needed for this journey—and then some (7:6, 11-26). Ezra petitioned the king, and “the king granted him all his request, according to the good hand of the Lord upon him” (7:6). Here are some highlights of the king’s decree, issued in response to Ezra’s request. Any Israelite who wants to go with Ezra, you’re free to go (7:13). For all you need to make sacrifices at the temple—here’s a “blank check” (7:14-22). Whatever God commands to be done for His house, let it be done (7:23). No tax will be imposed on those who work at the house of God (7:24). Appoint magistrates and judges who know the law of God to rule over you, and for those who don’t know the law of God, make sure you teach them (7:25). Punish severely those who do not observe the law of God or the law of the king (7:26). And what was Ezra’s reaction to these amazing concessions from the king? “Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty princes.’ So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me” (7:27-28).

When I read the Book of Ezra, especially chapters 7-10, I’m impressed with Ezra, but I’m even more impressed with God. I want the “good hand of our God” to be upon me, too, but for that to happen, I need to become more like Ezra—I need to prepare my heart to learn the will of God, obey the will of God, teach the will of God, and pray fervently to God.