

The Hand of the Lord His God Was Upon Him

Here's the history of the Jewish exiles in a quick paragraph: In 587BC, God sent the Babylonian Empire to destroy Jerusalem and take captive a remnant of the Jews. He promised to rescue them after seventy years. True to His word, God sent the Persian Empire to conquer Babylon, who permitted the Jews to return home. Most of the Jews had worked hard to establish new lives in Babylon, and were not interested in making the arduous five-month journey by foot to return to an uncertain life in Jerusalem. But a priest named Zerubbabel couldn't bear the thought of God's people being without a temple in Jerusalem, and he led a small group of Jews back to the city. Eighty years later, in 458BC, a scribe named Ezra rose up to lead a second group back to Jerusalem (Ezra 7-10).

Ezra's influence can be summed up by a single refrain, repeated six times: "the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (7:6; 7:9; 7:28; 8:18; 8:22; 8:31). Let's examine each place it is used, and see what promise it holds for God's leaders today.

1.) The hand of God allows a leader to succeed.

Ezra went up from Babylon ... and the king granted him all that he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him (7:6).

Ezra had to convince King Artaxerxes of Persia to permit them to depart, and to provide as much assistance as possible. Standing in the presence of these powerful men and asking for their support must have been a frightening prospect!

The king proved so generous that Ezra copied the official letter into his account (7:11-26). The pilgrims would receive a free will offering from the populace, a royal offering of gold and silver for the temple, a letter granting protection from the Persian officers of the Judean province, tax exemption for the ministers of the temple, and authority for Ezra to establish a local Jewish government in Jerusalem.

Ezra credited his success not to his charisma, but to God. Ezra merely had the courage to speak up and lead. It was the hand of God that provided success. Let us devote ourselves to working in the church, and thank God when He provides the success.

2.) A leader's commitment attracts the hand of God.

The good hand of his God was upon Him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel (7:9-10).

God blessed Ezra because his goal was to glorify God. Ezra didn't ask for a new car or new house, but a new opportunity to work in God's kingdom. Ezra organized his whole life around three things: studying the word, practicing the word, and teaching the word. With that kind of mindset, it's no wonder that God moved heaven and earth to bless Ezra's efforts and to bring the pilgrims safely to Jerusalem. Leaders in the Lord's church today should have exactly the same motivation—to read the Bible, live the Bible, and communicate the Bible.

3.) The hand of God allows a leader to influence others.

Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me (7:28).

Ezra couldn't just post a flyer and wait for volunteers. He had to convince the people that leaving their homes and risking their families were worthwhile sacrifices in the kingdom. He had to convince people to make God a priority. And they had to be willing to accompany him on a long and dangerous journey and start their lives all over again. Because God's hand was with him, Ezra found almost 1,500 people at the rendezvous point ready to go.

4.) The hand of God allows a leader to be bold.

Sadly, there were no Levites among the 1,500 pilgrims. This lack sorely needed correcting. So Ezra boldly asked again, this time going to the family of a specific man named Iddo.

According to the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of insight ... namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers... (8:18).

Because of Ezra's boldness, 48 Levites and 220 temple helpers were inspired to throw in their lot to support the pilgrims. They packed and were ready to go in just three days. Ezra was bold because it wasn't his project; it was God's project. When a leader gets a notion to do good work for God, others will devote themselves as well, especially if he imparts a vision and asks specific people whose talents are required.

5.) The hand of God allows a leader to relax and trust.

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him" (8:21-22).

Jerusalem lay 750 miles away. For five months, they would have to walk north along the Euphrates River, then cut across the parched Arabian desert to arrive in Damascus, then travel

south to cross the Jordan River and come into Jerusalem. The travelers would have all their belongings, livestock, and their women and children with them. They would also be carrying over 850 talents of gold and silver—a juicy target for the many thieves and brigands that regularly preyed on caravans along the road. But Ezra trusted God. God did indeed protect Ezra’s group, and brought them safely to Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, where they rested in peace for three days.

We journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way. Thus we came to Jerusalem (8:31).

Ezra was a great leader who had a vision to restore God’s people, and relied on God’s power to accomplish the task. Let our leaders also pray that God’s hand will guide us and protect us in the work we have to do!

—John Guzzetta