

Ezra 7-10

Aim of Lesson

To show that God is in control of the nations but still cares for individuals.

Background study

1 Kings 12; 2 Kings 17; Psalm 137; Jeremiah 29. Find a map showing the divided kingdom and places of exile.

Suggested outline of lesson

By asking questions and reminding the children of the division of the kingdom (lesson 57) and the behaviour of King Ahab (lesson 61), build up a picture of God's people divided into two different nations with two different kings. Use a Bible Atlas to show the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem still its capital, and Israel with Bethel and Dan where Jeroboam had built golden calves.

Explain that both kingdoms had good and bad kings but in the main Israel had a succession of kings that not only did not worship God but led astray the people that they were supposed to be ruling. Judah's kings were descended from King David and more often realised their responsibility; some tried to lead the people back to God.

Ask the children what God would have thought about the way his people were behaving. He would have been sad and angry when they went astray, and pleased when they remembered him. Remind them that it is the same with us. God wants us to worship him and is sad when we don't.

Ask about Elijah, Elisha and Jonah, and get the children to understand that God did all he could to warn the people that if they didn't remember him he would punish them.

The kingdom of Israel only lasted for about two hundred years and then God sent the Assyrians to besiege them and take them into captivity. Select some verses from 2 Kings 17:7-18 and read them with the children to illustrate what God felt about the people of Israel.

The kingdom of Judah lasted for about another two hundred years before they too had completely forsaken God and he sent the Babylonians to take them into captivity. 2 Kings 24:2-4 illustrates this.

Ask the children whether they think God would now forget his people and how they felt in a strange land. We do not know much about the people of the nation of Israel who went to Assyria but we do know that many of those of Judah who went to Babylon missed their homeland very much (Psalm 137), and that they lived together and tried to help each other to remember God. Daniel and his friends were amongst these. Most of the children will know some of the stories of Daniel and you can tell them that they will be learning more about him in the coming weeks.

God promised them that after seventy years they would be able to go back home and that he had a special person in mind who would allow them to do this. His name was King Cyrus.

It is amazing to think that this man, who did not worship God himself and had no reason to be kind to God's people, should suddenly decide to let them all go back to their homeland. But God is in charge and it was really he who wanted the people to go back home.

After seventy years (the little children who were taken into captivity would be grand parents) just as God had said, King Cyrus issued a proclamation saying that God had told him to build again the temple in Jerusalem. Any of his people who wanted to go back could do so and they could take with them gold and silver, and goods and animals, to help them to rebuild the temple.

If you read with the children Ezra 1:2-4 you may need to explain that Cyrus is described as king of Persia whereas the people of Judah were taken to Babylon. It will probably be sufficient to say that Cyrus was now king over the land that used to be called Babylon. When they learn the stories of Daniel they may appreciate the succession of kings better. As this lesson covers large periods of time it is probably best to keep it simple. Children of this age find long time spans difficult to understand.

The first group of people went back with a man called Zerubbabel, and despite many problems from the people living in the land the temple was built and there were great celebrations.

The next group to go home, some 80 years later, were to be in the charge of a man called Ezra. Describe the scene as it might have been beside the Ahava Canal where the people gathered and camped for three days before their journey. Explain how Ezra would have the very difficult job of sorting everyone out who was going and who was to look after the precious gifts Artaxerxes had sent; how he found there were no Levites in the company, so he had to find some and tell everyone what to do. Above all show how worried he was about the responsibility of taking all these people through dangerous desert areas where there would be bandits. The children will be able to identify with his touching little comments in Ezra 8:21-23, where he admits his fears but feels he cannot ask for protection because he must trust in God. They prayed and fasted, and Ezra's confidence in God's overall guidance was justified.

How happy Ezra would have been to see the rebuilt temple, and to tell everyone how God had guided them and brought them home the way he had planned.

Relevance to the children's lives

We often get so involved in our day to day cares that we forget that God has plans for the world and for us. What are God's plans for the world? What can we do to try to fit in with them?

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear God, we are glad that you know the future and will make all the nations do what you want. We are also glad that even though you are so powerful you will watch over us and keep us safe. Amen.

Memory verse

'The gracious hand of God is on everyone who looks to him.' (Ezra 8:22).