

Place: Lurgan Baptist 8:11:2009

EXPLORING EZRA

Reading: Ezra 9:1-15 10:1-8

9. PUTTING THINGS RIGHT

In the sixteenth century the Reformation under Martin Luther swept through Europe. Luther initiated a movement to reform the structure of the church, and to correct spiritual abuses by sound Biblical teaching. Before the assembled dignitaries at Worms he said,

“ Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right or safe. God help me, Amen. Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Was this not the beginning of the Protestant Reformation? The word “*reform*,” means “*correction of abuses or malpractices*,” or “*to improve by correcting abuses*.” Was this not exactly what happened here in Ezra day? The leaders initiated a reformation when they came to Ezra and informed him of the abuse of mixed marriages among the people of God. (9:1) You know, Ezra must have been thrilled to be back in the land of promise again. Back to the home of Jerusalem once more.

But he was only there four months (7:9 10:9) when he learned that all was not well with the people of God. *There was sin in the camp.* God’s own people were marrying their non-Jewish idol worshipping neighbours. Can you imagine the grief and disappointment of the man of God? You see, if the first section of the book is all about *national restoration* (Ch’s 1-6) then the last section of the book has to do with *spiritual reformation*. (Ch’s 7-10) *You see, if revival comes from above, then reformation comes from below.* In revival the supernatural element is uppermost as the Spirit of God works in the hearts of the people of God. But in reformation the human element is largely at work in taking the initiative to plan and bring about change for the better. You see, Ezra as a teacher of the Word of God could see that the people needed to be taught afresh the doctrine of separation. He then undertook to put necessary reforms into operation by organizing a proclamation, and setting up a commission to investigate the mixed marriages. The whole procedure took about three months. (10:9, 17)

You see, it was a reforming process and was done with great thoroughness and prayer. Do you know what this tells us? *It tells us, that while we long for revival in the church, but cannot make it happen, we can nevertheless bring about a reformation where it is needed.* Leaders, members, believers, can reform the structures of their local church so as to make its witness more effective in the community. My is this not vital if the gospel is to meet the challenges of today, and the church is to remain relevant in this age? What about our personal lives? Do we not need from time to time to take a long hard look at

ourselves and ask ourselves if we need reforming ? What about your prayer life ? What about your faithfulness at the services ? Your input into the local church, your financial contribution to God's work, your missionary support ? Are these not areas that need reforming in order to give a sharper edge to our Christian experience and witness ? My revival is what we desperately need today. But since that is primarily in God's realm we can in the meantime get on with the work of reformation. So I want to talk to you this "**Putting things Right.**" Three words summarize these two chapters.

(1) AFFINITY: That had to with the PEOPLE OF GOD

Do you see the word down there in (9:14) You see, they had failed to observe the clear command of God not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the region. They had not returned to idolatry but they had abandoned the rule of God's Word in certain areas of their lives. And the main offenders were the leaders of the people. (9:1) *You see, there was a failure again in leadership.* Sure, they were still leading the people, but they were leading them astray, instead of leading them in the ways of the Lord. Ezra was appalled by the affinity of the people. You see, by their actions they,

(a) DISOBEYED THE LORD:

They were in breach of the explicit stated Word of God which told them not to marry with the heathen peoples. Moses said to them "*When the Lord thy God shall bring*

thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites and the Girgashites, and the Amorites and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou. And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee, thou shalt smite them neither shalt thou make marriages with them, thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son."

(Deut 7:1-3 Ex 34:15-17) You see, Israel were meant to be a separated people, they were chosen to be holy unto the Lord (Ex 19:6) but they compromised and violated God's law on separation. My the same call to a life of separation applies to us as it did to the people of Ezra's day. Do you recall Paul's words to the church at Corinth ? "*be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.*" (2 Cor 6:14) A person who does not believe whether he be an atheist, a moralist, or a religionist can have no part with the child of God. Such an individual is governed by different principles, different passions and different prospects.

The Christian therefore must never select his partner in life from those with whom he has no common feelings or hopes. This rules for ever the unequal yoke in marriage, (1 Cor 7:29) the unequal yoke in business (2 Chron 20:35-37) the unequal yoke in evangelism with those deny, distort, or dilute the gospel. (Gal 1:8) "*But I will lead him, to the Lord, I will lead her to Christ.*" Have you ever heard that sort of talk ? Young people who are come up in the emotion of the moment believe they can influence their unsaved partner towards the Saviour. A

very unlikely outcome. Usually what happens is that the non-Christian partner has a detrimental influence on the believer. My do you think that you know better than God ? When I was courting, Catherine and I had a friend who was a keen believer. Devoted to the Saviour, she was baptized and she belonged to the gospel hall. That was until she met a boy who was “ *good,* ” but godless. I remember challenging her one night about this relationship. She laughed and she said, “ *You’ve nothing to my concerned about, this is just platonic, we’re just friends.* ” Just friends until an engagement ring, then a married ring was slipped upon her finger. Today sadly, she had left her first love “ *having loved this present world.* ” (2 Tim 4:10) Young folk, can I offer some Scriptural counsel. If you don’t want to marry a non-Christian, don’t date one. (a)

(b) DEFILED THE NATION:

God gave this marriage law to Israel to protect the nation from being defiled. God said to them “ *Neither shalt thou make marriages with them for they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods.* ” (Deut 7:3-4) In this very prayer of Ezra’s he speaks about the “ *abominations,* ” the detestable practices of these depraved nations. These awful practices included child sacrifices connected with the rituals of witchcraft. (Deut 18:9-13) You see, because of these mixed marriages the “ *holy seed,* ” was being defiled by foreign women from the very nations God had commanded Israel to destroy. (Deut 7:1-6) Indeed had Israel dealt with these nations in Moses day, they would not have had a

problem in Ezra’s day. “ ***Old sins cast long shadows.*** ” But do you see what was happening ? The nation was being defiled, before long the truth faith would be destroyed, how then could God bring the Saviour into the world ? My the Advent of the Saviour hinged on the purity of Ezra and the people of God. Do you know something ? Worldliness will defile you. John says, “ *Love not the world neither the things that are in the world.* ” (1 Jn 2:15) What is worldliness ? Its “ *anything that keeps me from loving the Lord as I ought to love Him, and from doing the will of God as I ought to do it.* ” It will start with

1. Communication with the World:

The world will approach you like this, “ *Why don’t you take the course of least resistance. After all you don’t want to be a Holy Joe, an old fuddy-duddy, a stick in the mud. Just be friends with the world.* ” Have you heard that sort of talk ? (James 4:4) It will lead to,

2. Contamination by the World:

What James calls becoming “ *spotted by the world.* ” (James 1:27) You see, if you get friendly with the world, the dirt of the world will get on you. My you cannot get close to the world and not get tainted by it. 1. 2. Then,

3. Conformation to the World:

The Bible warns us about this. It says, “ *Be not conformed to this world.* ” (Rom 12:1) One of the tragedies of the

modern church is that we are so conformed to the standards of the world. Anything the world does, the average Christian does. My you can no longer tell the difference between saved people and lost people by the way they dress, the way they act, and the places of amusement they go to. 1. 2. 3, and finally,

4. Condemnation with the World:

For Paul speaks of being “*condemned with the world.*” That does not mean you will lose your salvation, but it does mean you’ll lose your usefulness and testimony for the Lord, and it may mean it will lose your life. Do you recall Demas ? Paul says, “*Demas hath forsaken me having loved this present world.*” (2 Tim 4:10) He became so wrapped up in material things that he left Paul and said, “*I am going back home, I am going to spend my life looking out for number 1.*” Is this what the world has done to you ? (a) (b)

(c) THEY DISRUPTED THE FAMILY:

For they were children born to these unions. Do you know what the last verse in the book says ? “*Some of them had wives by whom they had children.*” (10:44) Can you imagine the pain when they had to put away their foreign wives and children ? What about the children ? My are you drifting away from the Lord ? Are you involved in things you have no business being in ? ***Will you take a good at your children ?*** For your sinful compromise will affect your family. Do you recall when Elimelech went down to Moab in disobedience to the will of God he took

his family with him ? (Ruth 1:1-2) You see, this man’s spiritual condition had an effect on his family for they married strange women. Mahlon married Ruth (4:10) and Chilion married Orpah. As we have discovered they were forbidden to marry Gentile women but they did it anyhow. My do we ever wonder why our children fail to grow up in the fear of the Lord ? Why they remain unsaved ? One thing is absolutely sure, their lives are affected by yours. (Rom 14:7) What a deplorable situation this was in Judah, yet how privileged this remnant was to have a spiritual leader like Ezra. (1)

(2) AGONY: That had to do with the PRIEST OF GOD

For Ezra was a priest (7:12) and as such he comes before God at the time of the evening sacrifice around 3pm for he recognizes that its only on the basis of sacrifice that he can approach God. This is one of the great prayers of the Bible. *Did you know that there are three chapter nines in the Bible that are significant for great prayers ?* Ezra’s prayer in Ezra (Ch 9) Nehemiah’s prayer in Nehemiah (Ch 9) and Daniel’s prayer in Daniel (Ch 9) Ezra knew how to pray in a time of crisis for he was familiar with the path to the throne of grace. He was on “*speaking terms with God,*” at all times. Now you might think that Ezra’s response to the sin of the people was “*a bit over the top,*” that he was overreacting. But that is because you fail to grasp the nature and gravity of the sin. Ezra was “*astonied,*” ((;3) it means “*to be shocked,*” and so in agony of soul he comes before God on behalf of a covenant breaking nation. Do you see there was,

(a) EARNESTNESS:

Here. He rent his garment, plucked his hair sat down appalled as he thought of the nations sins. They were on the very verge of repeating the circumstances that had led to the exile in the first place and the man of God is marked by unusual grief. He was earnest as he came before the Lord in prayer. James speaking of Elijah reminds us that “*he prayed earnestly.*” (James 5:17) Literally it means “*he prayed in his prayer.*” Do you do that ? Isn’t it refreshing to hear a new convert pray without all the clichés and jargon that the rest of us use ? Praying earnestly, sincerely, and without pretence.

(b) BROKENNESS:

Hear him as he cries, “*O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee.*” (9:6) Ezra was too ashamed to look up to heaven as he prayed. (Lk 18:9) Jeremiah in his day spoke of people who were not ashamed. He says, “*Were they ashamed that had committed abomination ? nay, they were not at all ashamed neither could they blush.*” (Jer 8:12) My is sin still shocking to you ? Do the sins of Christians move you to tears ? Or have we become so accustomed and acclimatized to ungodliness that it no longer appalls us ? Where is that broken spirit, that humiliation, that self judgment that needs to be seen ? In a word its brokenness something that most of us know nothing about yet God says, “*To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word.*”

(Is 66:2) That’s what happened here. They “*trembled at the words of the God of Israel.*” (9:4) Too many believers today are willing to read the Word, study it, outline it and even defend it, but the Word of God has no effect on their lives whatsoever. My do you take the Word of God seriously ? Can you see Ezra here, (a) (b)

(c) AWARENESS:

For this man of God has an acute awareness of the sin of his people. He compares it to a flood which had spread across the whole land bringing devastation and chaos in its train. (9:6) My when are we going to take responsibility for our own sin ? When we are going to stop making excuses or putting the blame on others ? Like Adam who blamed Eve, then Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on. Did you know what Ezra said ? “*Behold we are here before Thee in our trespasses for we cannot stand before Thee because of this.*” (9:15) You see, there is a

(d) ONENESS:

Here as he identifies himself with the people of God. He speaks about “*our iniquities,*” not “*their iniquities.*” Today it is easy to divorce yourself from the church. My the church of Jesus Christ in Ulster is in a bad state. But listen, its not their sin, its our sin. If the church is in apathy then we are in apathy, if the church is indifferent then we are indifferent, if the church is unconcerned for lost souls, then we are unconcerned for lost souls for we are the church. Do you recall that old chorus,

**Its not my brother, not my sister
But its me O Lord
Standing in the need of prayer, purity and power**

Did you notice that Ezra finishes this prayer with,

(e) THANKFULNESS:

You see, he is well aware were it not for God's grace, they would not be back in the holy land nor would the temple have been rebuilt. (9:8-9) And the same grace that they experienced in the past, they can know in the present crisis. My where would any of us be today without God's grace ? The grace that saves, the grace that satisfies, the grace that sustains.

**Amazing grace ! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see**

**Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home**

**(3) ACTIVITY: That has to do with the PLAN OF
GOD**

To delve into family matters is always dangerous and to seek to disentangle the family ties of these people required great courage. But Ezra with the backing of the people,

acted and called upon the people to put things right with God. In so doing he enunciated three principles.

(a) THE PRINCIPLE OF REPENTANCE:

Can you imagine the unbearable grief they experienced in parting with their families ? (Deut 24:1 1 Cor 7:12) But then sin had to be dealt with ? When the people gathered around Ezra, we can see that they were truly contrite because we are told “ *the people wept very sore.* ” (10:1) They wept bitterly. Do you ever weep over your sins ? Are there things that you need to put away ? Are there things that you need to put right with the Lord, with your fellow-believer, with your family ? Is this not the very thing that is lacking in the church to day ? **Repentance !** Have you ever noticed that in the Scriptures God asks the church to repent. In the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor the Lord asks all but two of them to repent. Time and again we hear this word from the lips of the Risen Lord “ *Repent, repent, repent.* ” The Bible says, “ *If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* ” (1 Jn 1:9)

(b) THE PRINCIPLE OF REGULATION:

For the rule that was to govern their behaviour was the rule of God as expressed in His Word. Look if you will at (10:3) “ *Let it be done according to the law,* ” (10:5) “ *that they should do according to this word.* ” Ezra teaches us a vital matter in church discipline. Everything must be done according to the Word of the Lord. “ *What*

saith the Scripture ?” should settle every question. My is this not where reformation must begin ? We must walk in the light of God’s Word. When we come to the Word it brings conviction to our hearts. We realise that we are transgressing that which God has written. And when we go to the Lord in confession and there is real repentance, the result will be restoration and renewal. (a) (b)

(c) ***THE PRINCIPLE OF REFORMATION:***

1. Reformation was Revealed:

Shecaniah proposed that a covenant be made with God, a covenant in which sin would put away. (10:3) This was not easy for Shecaniah for some of his own relatives had sinned by marrying foreign women. (10:26) *Yet here was a man who put the discipline of God, before the disobedient of family.* Can I ask, who is first in your heart ? The Lord Jesus says, “ *If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.* ” (LK 14:26)

2. Reformation was Resisted:

Do you see (10:15) ? The words “ *employed about,* ” should read “ *opposed this.* ” There was a small minority against the whole procedure. Why ? Probably because they considered the price of being faithful to God’s Word to costly. Do you know something ? There’s a cost in serving the Lord. When Scott of Antarctic was building up his team he was inundated by enthusiasts offering their

services. But he had to weed out the realists from the romantics, and warned. “ *Are you ready to meet the snow, the ice, the bitter winds, insufficient food, exhaustion, weariness and the boredom of it all ?* ” If that was true of following Scott to the Antarctic, is it more true when it comes to following the Lord to glory ? 1. 2.

3. Reformation was Realized:

Can you imagine the day of separation when it came ? It must have been a harrowing experience. Yet it was the sinfulness of these people that led to such a terrible situation. But now the nation was restored, cleansed, forgiven and back in covenant relationship with God. For the child of God there is always a way back. You see, God’s desire for Israel then, is God’s desire for you now. “ *Be ye holy for I am holy,* ” (1 Pet 1:16 Lev 11:44) That’s the standard of separation. Are you violating it ? Are there aspects of your life that need reforming ? Has the Lord been placing His finger on those things ? How will you respond ? Will you say with God’s people of old “ *Lord as thou hast said, so must we do.* ” (10:12)

**Lord, take my life and make it wholly Thine
Fill my poor heart with Thy great love Divine
Take all my will, my passion, self and pride
I now surrender, Lord in me abide**

