

Ezra 9:1-15 Spiritual Reformation

(Introduction)

We are continuing to read the book of Ezra with our theme of "From Survival to Revival."

I was baptized in April of 2009, and so this year marks 11 years for me as a Christian. I have been given a newness of character through walking with Jesus, but that doesn't mean that everything always goes well. At times I feel as if God has left me. I face problems that appear too difficult for me to solve. Through this I have realized that I need to revisit my relationship with God and be renewed and experience spiritual reform. Therefore, in light of that, how can we have renewal in our relationship with God and experience spiritual reform?

Our Scripture today is: Ezra 9:1-15. From these verses, I would like to together with you get a taste of how spiritual reform can occur. Let's read these verses.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 4 Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. 5 And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, 6 saying : "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. 7 From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. 8 But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. 9 For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

10 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. 12 Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.' 13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, 14 shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? 15 O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this."

From these verses then, how do we learn that spiritual reform begins? First of all, it begins by understanding the depth of my own sin. Secondly, spiritual reform happens when we repent.

Thirdly, it happens when we come to God for his mercy and grace.

In summary, spiritual reform is: Awareness of our sin, Repentance from sin, and Dependence on God for his mercy and grace.

So, first of all, let's start from the first point, that is, that spiritual reform begins by understanding the depth of our sin. Allow me to summarize what happened in Ezra before chapter 9. The king of Persia, Artaxerxes, issued a decree that sent Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem. There Ezra taught the people of Israel the words of God. This was a huge support for Ezra to have the backing of the king. It wasn't only Ezra who went, but also the priests who served in the temple, Levites and others. Because the Lord's hand was on Ezra, they arrived safely in Jerusalem. After they arrived, they worshiped the Lord. They delivered the decree of Artaxerxes into the hands of the local governor. And, as it says in chapter 8, they received financial and material support for the building of the temple.

Then in chapter 9, Ezra and those with him receive some shocking news. Look at verse 1 and 2. After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race [a] has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost."

Those in positions of leadership among the people approached Ezra. They gave Ezra a report about what was currently going on among the people. That is, that those serving in the temple, the priests and Levites, were intermarrying those from other nations. The result of those marriages was that practices different from what the Lord commanded were being engaged in and they were losing the purity of their race and their devotion to God.

By only looking at this, one would think that the Bible is condemning international marriage. But this is not true at all. In Ezra 8:21, even the Gentiles were able to seek Israel's God and celebrate the Passover with them, if they would separate themselves from their own culture and practices. If you look back at Jesus' ancestors, you see Ruth. She was a Moabite, as Ezra 9:1 refers to. So, it isn't that the Bible is condemning international marriage. So then, what was the issue?

The problem was that through intermarrying with those of other nations, they were also taking on the practices of those people. For example, the Ammonites and Canaanites worshiped Molech. Molech was said to be the god of the harvest. In order to have a good harvest, they would need to worship Molech by offering up and sacrificing newborn children. This was a clear distinction between worshipping the true God and worshipping a false god. It was a clear break from their faith in the God of Israel. This falls into the area of practices was unthinkable. Ezra and those with him who had come out of exile by the strong hand of the Lord and had taught the people the words of God grieved this sin greatly.

Verse 3 says, "As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled."

Ezra tore his garments. This is what the people did in times of grief. Also, Ezra was so appalled that he pulled out his hair and sat there in disbelief.

Nearly 60 years before this, the people of Israel had overcome opposition and persecution to rebuild the temple by the grace of God. In spite of the fact that they had joyfully worshiped God from their hearts, over the course of time, they fell back into the unbelieving practices and sins of their ancestors.

What we see here is that even those who had been pardoned from sin and had entered into fellowship with God, still had the influence and existence of sin within them.

We as well can think about the existence and effects of sin in our own lives. Even though God has saved us, pardoned us, and we have walked in joy as a Christian, we still experience the depth of sin and unbelief. When I have realized my own sin, I have had the experience of thinking that maybe I am not really saved.

Paul, who wrote many letters in the New Testament, was just like us in that he faced the depth of his own sin. Roman 7:15 and 24 say this:

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."
"Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"

Paul is confessing his sin, which is not named, and his conflict with it. But he doesn't end with the confession. In 7:25 he says, Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature [a] a slave to the law of sin. Even as he knows the depth of his sin, he also experiences forgiveness and cleansing, and expresses great thanks.

Brothers and sisters, our spiritual reform begins with recognizing the depth of our own sin. Israel fell into the sin of unbelief, but Ezra was sent to them by the hand of God to proclaim God's Word and to exhort them to return to God, so that their faith may be rebuilt and for spiritual reform to happen. In order to experience spiritual reform, how do we come to know the depth of our own sin? We do it through God's Word. Paul said to Timothy in II Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that they servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." This is encouraging us to be intimate with God in his Word. Therefore, in order to experience spiritual reform in our lives, and to know the depth of our sin, let us love the words of God, read it and be taught and changed by it.

What happened to Ezra when he was in disbelief about Israel's sin. Our second point is that spiritual reform begins with repentance from sin. Look at verse 4. "Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice."

When they learned of Israel's sin of unbelief, they sat there appalled for a long time. They sat there until it was time for the evening sacrifice. From the people of Israel, those who feared the Lord gathered around him. Ezra knelt down and spread out his arms to the Lord. To kneel before the Lord means to humble oneself. To raise one's arms up to the Lord meant to petition before him.

Let's look at Ezra's prayer in verses 6 and 7. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. 7 From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today."

Ezra's prayer before the Lord has a special characteristic about it. He includes himself among the Israelites who have sinned and is very humble. Actually, he has not committed the sins they have. So why does he confess their sin and include himself in it? Because he considers himself to be a part of the covenant community that God led to rebuild the temple. When Israel sinned, God gave judgment both individually as well as corporately. God looked at Israel as a covenant community. So when Ezra says, "We," he is talking about the covenant community that has sinned. Then continuing in verse 7, Ezra is looking back in history at the way his ancestors behaved. Because of the sin of his ancestors, we are like this now. He confesses that their sin is affecting them negatively even now. Ezra conceals nothing as he repents of the sins of his ancestors before the Lord, and asks for forgiveness.

Ezra and the people around him spoke of David, who was king of Israel, as a man after God's own heart, a man who pleased God. However, David committed the sin of adultery. He tried to cover it up, but the prophet Nathan brought this sin to David's attention. When this sin was revealed to David, he wrote about it in Psalm 51. David said to the Lord, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." David came before God with a contrite heart. David came before the Lord with the depth of his sin and repented in confession. Because of that, David was given spiritual reform.

Brothers and sisters, God will give us spiritual reform when we come before him and confess our sin and repent. Our sin separates us from God. Sin causes us to turn our backs on God. We are separated from God. But God who is filled with grace and mercy, sent Jesus Christ to this world, who gave up his life on the cross so that we might have the forgiveness of our sins. God is inviting us to confess our sin and repent and to receive forgiveness. Shall we not respond to his invitation and

repent? God will listen to your confession and repentant heart, and he will bring about spiritual reform in you.

Then, what do we do after we repent? The third point of spiritual reform is: to rely on the grace and mercy of God. Ezra's petition and prayer continues. in verses 8 and 9. "But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.⁹ For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem."

After Ezra repented of his sin before the Lord, He focused on God's grace and mercy. The people of Israel committed sin against God. He could've obliterated them from the face of the earth. Instead, he did not destroy them, but left a remnant that would live on. And, he led them to be able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem which had been in ruins. "To brighten our eyes" means that He has turned people toward the words of God and that he has shown them his favor. Also, he caused them to see in verse 9 that God had extended his favor to them by changing the hearts of the kings, thus giving them life and enabling the temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt. God focused their attention on the historical work that he had done.

Look at verses 10-12. 10 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. 12 Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'

In verse 10, Ezra is confessing that the people of Israel have forsaken God's commands. He is reminding them of the words the prophets have spoken. Verse 11 is a combination of Lev. 18:24 and Ezekiel 36:17. Verse 12 is a summary of the commands written in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Ezra, as a scholar of the law, was very familiar with it. As he illuminated various parts of the law, the sin of the people became very apparent, and he is confessing that. He brings his prayer to a close like this. Look at verses 13-15.

13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, 14 shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? 15 O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this."

You would not think that after God had led the people of Israel out of exile by his grace and mercy, and had given them a remnant of people who would live on with a temple that was rebuilt, that then they would sin against God again and forsake him. How in the world could they do this? Ezra is grieving this. Even after their sin, Ezra is exhorting them and leading them. He is depending on God's great mercy and grace. He is humbling himself before God and depending on God.

Brothers and sisters, as you know, Japan and the whole is being threatened by the coronavirus. Through this though, we are learning the importance, the preciousness of life, and also becoming more aware of the reality of death. Of course, the coronavirus has the power to kill a person, but there is something worse that we need to face. That is, the sin that is within us. Sin entered the world through Adam and Eve. Therefore, all of us are born into the world already having a sin nature. Through the words of Paul in the Bible, we see very clearly that "the wages (result) of sin is death." As sinners, God could bring death upon us at any moment. However, within the contagiousness of the coronavirus, why are we allowed to live? It is only because of God's grace and mercy. So, doesn't that mean that we should rely wholly on his mercy and grace to help us?

My brothers and sisters, our spiritual reform depends on this deep mercy and grace of God. The reason we are allowed to live in spite of our sin is because of God's mercy and grace. Also, in the midst of the spread of the virus, we are learning to depend on God's abundant mercy, and we are being prepared and equipped. Therefore, let us depend on God's mercy. Let us rely on it. As we continue in a time when we cannot meet all together for worship, God is inviting us to experience spiritual reform as we learn to depend only on Him.

The people of Israel and we as well are sinners before God. We only deserve death as a result of this sin. However, we even more than Ezra have received mercy. God loves and has had mercy on us by sending his Son Jesus Christ to this world, to be crucified on the cross, to take our punishment for sin, to receive God's anger, and to die in order to redeem us. Through the redemption of Jesus, once for all time, we who believe this are given forgiveness of sins forever. Therefore, let us recognize the depth of our sin. Let us continually repent. Let us depend on the mercy of God. That is where our spiritual reform will begin. Let us pray.

"Deeply gracious Father God, I praise Your precious name. Lord, as the depth of the people's sin was made known to Ezra, show to us through your Word the depth of our sin. We repent of our deep sin. We have forsaken you who has continually guided us. Please forgive us for wandering away from you. Allow us to depend upon your grace and mercy. Lord, as the coronavirus is spreading, we feel both anxiety and fear. However, what we must fear even more is our own sin. We cling to the salvation of your cross. Turn our hearts toward You. May we continue to hear your gospel. May we be sure of our salvation. May we continue to be reformed spiritually. We pray in our loving Savior's name, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."