



“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments” (Ezra 7:10).

The Necessity of Dedication

Central Truth: Loyalty to the Bible principles of faith and devotion will bring a revival among God's people.

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Topic: Israel: Captivity of; Revival.

The deportation of Judah into the Babylonian captivity was in three stages: 606 B.C.; 598 B.C.; and 586 B.C. So the restoration of Judah to her homeland was in three stages: 536 B.C.; 458 B.C.; and 445 B.C. From the first deportation to the first return was seventy years, as predicted by Jeremiah the prophet of God (Jeremiah 25:11, 12).

God used three men to lead the remnant back to Palestine. (1) Zerubbabel led about fifty thousand back to Palestine in 536 B.C., immediately following the decree of King Cyrus releasing them from exile. They rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. (2) Ezra led about six thousand back in 458 B.C. after receiving permission from King Artaxerxes. He led a revival among the Jews, elevating their religious observances to conform to the law by Moses. (3) Nehemiah led a small group, the numbers not recorded in the Bible, in 445 B.C. He rebuilt the wall of defense around the city while serving as governor of the province. How different were those men in their background — royalty, scribe and priest, and statesman. Yet, each was used of God to perform His purpose.

This week, the study centers in the work of Ezra, priest of God and scribe of the law of God. It is concerned with the great revival of spiritual religion which he led in Judah. Its aim is to stimulate loyalty to the Bible principles of faith and devotion.

I. RETURN

Ezra was authorized to lead a group of Jews back to Palestine by the decree of King Artaxerxes. (That king was the son of Xerxes, sometimes called Ahasuerus, who took Esther to be his queen.) He seemed kindly disposed toward the Jews, partly because of the influence of Esther and Mordecai in his father's reign.

Ezra is described as “*the son of Seraiah . . . son of Zadok . . . son of Phinehas . . . son of Eleazar . . . son of Aaron the chief priest*” (Ezra 7:1-5). That means he was a priest of God. He was given much religious training, even in a foreign land and there was kindled in him a love and zeal for the law of God. As “*a ready scribe in the law of Moses*” (7:6), Ezra was widely known as a man learned in the law (7:14).

To say Ezra was a scribe of the law meant three things. (1) He interpreted the law to the people. (2) He recorded the history of the nation. (3) He taught the people the way they should walk in the will of God. Ezra was no mere professional religionist. “*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments*” (Ezra 7:10).

That was the leader of the second group of Jews who returned from Babylon to Palestine.

King Artaxerxes' decree was used of God to provide all things necessary for Ezra to return and do the work needed in the restored community. (1) Everyone who wanted to accompany Ezra was permitted to do so. (2) Other sacred vessels were given for use in the temple in Jerusalem. (3) Permission was given for the king's treasury to provide whatever was needed for use in the temple. (4) Ezra had a *carte blanche* authority to draw from the king's treasury for any necessary expense. How amazing that God would move on the heart of a pagan king to make such provisions.

Ezra and his associates gathered at the River Ahava. He surveyed the group and discovered there were no Levites among them. An appeal to Iddo, who lived at Casiphia, brought a response from 220 Levites to join them. The king offered a band of soldiers to accompany them for protection, but Ezra thought it would not be a proper testimony to the power of God to keep them safe. They fasted and prayed, seeking God's help on the journey. The treasures to be taken were entrusted to the care of twenty-two priests. At last, the journey was ready to begin.

The trip took a total of four months, an average of about eight miles per day. They were not able to travel each day, of course, and were delayed on

occasion by threats from their enemies (Ezra 8:31). After 180 days on the road, they arrived safely in Jerusalem. Three days were spent in rest and getting settled in their new residences. The treasures were brought to the temple on the fourth day. At last, the responsibilities of the journey were ended.

II. REBELLION

Then heartbreak came. Ezra discovered the truth about the apostasy of the restored community of Jews. The people had broken God's law! They had not separated themselves from pagan people and practices. They were doing according to the abominations of surrounding nations, the very sins for which their fathers had been sent into captivity. They intermarried and brought paganism into their own homes. Rulers as well as people had engaged in the trespass (Ezra 9:1, 2). Ezra's heart was broken. The nation had not learned the lesson God had taught her in the captivity. Only a generation after the return began under Zerubbabel, Judah was committing the same sins that had brought the exile.

What was the nature of their sin? It was a lack of separation from wickedness which was expressed in intermarriage with pagans. That brought the evil of idolatry into Jewish homes. It influenced the Jew to compromise his religious conviction that there is no God but one, the Lord God of Israel. It put the home in a position where children were taught to fear pagan gods and to worship before images. God had warned against that. *“Thou shalt make no covenant with them . . . neither shalt thou make marriages with them For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly”* (Deuteronomy 7:2, 3, 4).

Religious distinction is the very essence of true religion. True religion cannot be compromised without being destroyed. Pure water, mixed with impure, cannot remain pure. Tragic consequences follow the mixing of religious truth with error, so dramatic measures must be taken to purify the faith.

Ancient Israel was not the only one to experience the allurements to compromise religious faith. It is a present appeal in every generation, even today.

III. REPENTANCE

Ezra manifested the spirit of sorrow over sin and zeal for righteousness. (1) He tore his garment, a sign of deep grief and painful affliction. (2) He pulled out a portion of his hair, an expression of violent wrath of moral indignation. (3) He “sat astonished,” indicating a spirit stunned, desolate, rigid, and beyond emotional expression. (4) He “wept sore,” showing his regret over the sins of his people. (5) He confessed, proving that he regarded the conduct of his brethren as a violation of the law of God. He became the public conscience of the nation as he prayed, confessed, wept, and cast himself down before the house of God (Ezra 10:1).

Thank God for men and women who, like Ezra, bear the sins of their generation upon their hearts to God. He prayed, “*O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens*” (Ezra 9:6). It is the part of the intercessor to identify himself with the people for whom he prays. Ezra did not speak of “those sinners.” He was a part of the generation which had erred, though he was not personally guilty of the sins which he confessed. He spoke of “our iniquities,” “our trespasses,” and confessed, “*We have forsaken thy commandments.*” The intercessor does not take a self-righteous attitude, but identifies in love with the ones for whom he prays.

Word spread abroad that someone's heart was broken over sin. Word like that always spreads, doesn't it? “A very great congregation” of people gathered themselves in Jerusalem where Ezra wept and prayed. (That is the way to begin revival today!) The heart of the nation was touched by the prayers of one man. The people were moved to repentance over their sins. Revival had begun!

Is it possible that God will give revival that way today? It is very possible. The question rather is, “Who is there whose heart is so moved by the sin of this generation that he will weep and pray before God for renewed purity!” Surely the example of Ezra will arouse prayer warriors today.

IV. RENEWAL

“What shall we do!” became the heart-cry of the men of Judah. They knew they had sinned against the Lord, but what course of action could secure their forgiveness and reconciliation to Him!

A. Sin must be put away. There is no revival without a forsaking of sin. God said through the prophet Isaiah,

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our

God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7). God's way of revival always begins with the spirit of repentance.

Ezra called for drastic actions in Judah. The Jews must put away the pagan partners they had married. That sounds harsh. Surely God would not command divorce, would He? Yes, He would. The marriages were contracted in violation to the expressed command of God. Revival never comes when a people continues to live in sin.

B. The Word of God must be obeyed. Nehemiah gathered the people “as one man” in the city of Jerusalem. For one-half day each day the law of God was read and explained to the citizens. “*So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading*” (Nehemiah 8:8). “*And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God*” (Nehemiah 9:3). For twenty-four days the same procedure was followed. The exposure to the Word of God was followed with a praise service in which they thanked God for His care and vowed, “*Behold, we are servants this day*” (Nehemiah 9:36).

The Word of God has a purifying effect. It lies at the heart of every true revival of religion. Back to the Bible!

C. Ordinances of religion must be observed. There is no magic grace which accompanies rituals of religion, but they do speak of spiritual things and help men's devotion. Ezra and Nehemiah caused the institution of observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (which had not been observed since the conquest under Joshua; 8:16, 17) to the great profit of the people.

D. A solemn covenant must be confirmed. The people committed themselves anew to be the unique people of God (Nehemiah 9:36-38). That is revival: a change from open rebellion against God to a solemn and joyful covenant with God.

How does revival come? It always follows the same course: grief over sin, rebuke of sin, forsaking of sin, understanding of God 's Word, activity in forms of worship, and personal renewal of allegiance to God. Thank God for every occasion when He has brought revival in times past. Thank God that revival is possible today. Revival will stir in your heart as you commit yourself in loyalty to Bible principles of faith and devotion.

1. What is the historical setting of the lesson?
2. Who was Ezra?
3. How was Ezra qualified to lead revival in Judah?

4. What sin had entered among the Jews?
5. How does Deuteronomy 7:2-4 show it to be so serious?
6. Why should a saint of God grieve over sin?
7. How might the grief of one influence others today?
8. What are the steps toward revival as illustrated by Ezra and Nehemiah?
9. How can you be sure of your dedication to God?
10. How can you help others to be loyal to God?