

Restore: Always Reforming

Ezra 7:1-10

We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs.

Introduction: Nine days from now we are coming up on a significant memorial, one that we do not often think about but that profoundly changed each one of us this morning. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther had his *95 Theses* nailed to church door at Wittenberg, outlining clerical abuses and the practice of indulgences. This famous event is often considered the launching point of the Protestant Reformation.

Why is this so significant to us? What was at stake? On a park bench near the University of Geneva there are words chiseled into stone as a lasting memorial to the driving force of the Reformation itself: *Past tenebras lux*, or "**after darkness, light**". This is a reference to the darkness of the Middle Ages where the gospel was eclipsed by works driven righteousness and the Word of God was veiled to the eyes and minds of the common man. The darkness was a shadow that kept men from experiencing the joy of faith alone in Jesus Christ because only the professional religious had access to the Latin Scriptures. Removing the eclipse meant a call to return to the Scriptures alone so that man could know that He could be saved or justified by **faith alone**, and that works serve as corroborating evidence rather than the ground of salvation (Rom. 3:28; Titus 3:5). Without this, there is no gospel. Without the gospel, there is no church. To reject justification by faith alone is to reject the gospel and to fall as a church. So this was not simply an argument from contentious, bellicose, fuddy-duddy theologians, this was a call for the joy of all peoples to salvation in the true Jesus known by His revealed Word!¹

The reality of this Reformation from 500 years ago is this: **every generation throughout church history has faced doctrinal disputes and struggles, and every generation is going to have to decide what is worth fighting for, what is worth dying for, and what side of history we will be on.** The only basis we have for deciding this is **Scripture alone**, which informs us what is worth reforming and where we drift. It also means that every generation is on the brink of falling on the wrong side when there is a *neglect of God's Word*, from both a knowledge and practice perspective. So many things replace the Scripture in our lives: *tradition, opinion, pragmatism, and cultural wisdom* to name a few. Losing the Scripture is invariably the **frog in a kettle** analogy (although we can switch "frog" with "cat" and I'd be fine): throw a frog in a boiling pot of water, and he'll jump right out; put that same frog in a pot of water and slowly turn up the heat, and within a few hours you'll enjoy old school Southern cuisine. That is always how we lose things like salvation in Christ alone, by faith alone, through grace alone, in the Word alone, and to the glory of God alone: slowly but surely.

This is exactly what prompted Ezra to return in Ezra chapter 7. He made his way back to the capitol city of his ancestors to reform what was eclipsed slowly throughout the decades, so his people were missing out on what we all long for: joy in our Savior, purpose in our lives, and clarity in what we should be doing.

The Slow Drift That Demands Reform (7:1-6)

"Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiyah, son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Meraioth, son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest --- this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a **scribe skilled in the Law of Moses** that the LORD God of

¹ R.C. Sproul, www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reformation-rescued-the-gospel

Israel had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, **for the good hand of the LORD his God was on him.**"

Drift Away from Truth

We have not met Ezra yet in this book, but now he becomes the prominent figure. There are a few things to consider here:

1) **57 years have passed between the end of chapter 6 and beginning of 7** - We know that Ezra led a relatively small band of returnees over a 4 month trip back from the area of Babylon to Jerusalem. Since nearly 6 decades have passed, we can assume the leadership around at the completion of the Temple are dead and those alive would have been young men and women.

2) **Everything was trending up at the end of chapter 6** - Look at the end of chapter 6. There was a **celebration with joy** (6:16) where they re-dedicated the Temple in a similar yet smaller way than Solomon had done it in 1 Kings 8. They celebrated Passover, made sin offering, and even had begun to draw in outsiders to worship (6:21). They got back to observing the Feasts, and **the Lord made them joyful** (22). Even the King of Assyria was for them (22). In other words, they had all they needed to succeed and sustain long term worship. God had delivered on His promise and the people faithfully played it out.

3) **Ezra had asked to return, and it was granted to him** - Ezra had asked the king to return, and the king let him go **because** the good hand of the Lord was on him (a favorite phrase from here on out). We know that Artaxerxes had just fought off an insurrection from Egypt a couple of years earlier (460 B.C), as Egypt was aided by Pericles and Greek ships. This meant that Artaxerxes was desirous of making sure all the controlled areas of his rule were set in order so that there would not be surprise uprising. He sent Ezra to make sure that would happen. Ezra went because he wanted to see true spiritual reform. God again used governmental figures and circumstances to achieve His purposes.

4) **There was a drift happening** - What Ezra found when he returned was a people who had not outright abandoned the Temple or worship, but had absolutely compromised it. They had not separated themselves from the people of the land (9:1), but intermarried and began to adopt a mixture of practices. This was the slow drift away from the Law, away from fidelity to God alone, and a divided heart among the people. **The Law had been eclipsed.** Idolatry had crept in. Reform was needed.

5) **Ezra's credentials mattered** - Normally we skip over the section read this morning. Funny names and weird sounding titles do not resonate. But there are **two important** points to consider in this list.

- **Ezra had credentials as a priest** - We do not typically go back more than 2 or 3 generations when we talk about family, but Ezra came in as a real priest, from the Aaronic-Zadokite high priestly line, though he was not a high priest. For a group of people always grappling with identity, this would have signaled that a significant person was coming (60 years from now, someone who was the *CEO of Amgen* may not mean anything to those outside of the area, but would be valued by people from this area)
- **Ezra had credentials as a public figure** - He had a high office in Artaxerxes, and the word "scribe" was something like "secretary of". In Judah, he would have been something like **"secretary on behalf of religious institutions"**. All that said, he was a big deal and his arrival was a big deal.

Drift Toward Cultural Norms

We saw this drift before in the land. In fact 100 years before, Jeremiah the prophet had warned against it:

Jeremiah 2:8 - *"The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit."*

In other words, the leaders of a century before had drifted away, NOT FROM RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS, but from God Himself, practicing something they did not understand, teaching the views and opinions of the idols of the land. There was activity but no power. It was a show of righteousness with no backing, but simply tradition learned by rote.

Jeremiah 7:4-11 - *"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words 'This is the temple to the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'"*

The people had drifted into injustice (5), had oppressed the sojourner, fatherless, widow (6), and had gone after other gods (6). They did all of this but still **presumed** that God would be for them because they had the temple! In other words, they believed that as long as they had the **form or structure** they would be safe. God never wants this. He wants out heart. So God destroyed the Temple and dispersed the people.

Drift happens slowly but surely. Its means moving away from the way God prescribes worship and life and adopts the opinions and wisdom of culture. It happens when conviction is small and pragmatism is large. It happens when we can define our philosophy of ministry by the latest business strategies but not from the Bible. Drift happens when we become Biblically illiterate to what the Bible **actually** says, rather than what we *think* it says.

The Source That Guarantees Reform (7:7-9)

"And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the month he came to Jerusalem."

Scripture Is How We Know God

Ezra was "skilled in the Law of Moses" (6). This was the foundation for reform and the quintessential strategy Ezra relied upon. He came back to set things in order, to bring back proper worship, to teach the people, and call for a turning from cultural compromise. Scripture is how we know God. We can know about Him from His general revelation, meaning the beauty and wonder of His creation, but that is only enough to condemn if left by itself. God communicates through His Word, or divine/special revelation. This is how we know His character, attributes, His plan, our sin, Christ's person and sacrifice, and what we are to do. It's the difference between knowing about my wife Erin before we were married (I knew about a girl named Erin Gammon), and being married to her. This is the essence of **eternal life, that we know God in Jesus Christ** (John 17:3) so that we would abide in Him so that **His joy would be in us, and our joy would be made full** (John 15:11). Knowing God is not simply a side benefit, it is the essence of salvation.

Scripture Transforms our Minds

Scripture also transforms us: *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."* (Rom. 12:2). How do we make sure that we are not drifting away from God and toward cultural wisdom: we are renewed in our thinking by Scripture. This means that what we are after is not simply a verse a day to keep the devil away, or a snippet of wisdom, but we are looking for deep, real, transformation that means the lens by which we see everything is reshaped (like spiritual Lasik surgery).

The concern we have today is what Albert Mohler calls *"The scandal of Biblical Illiteracy."* Americans revere the Bible, but by and large, they do not read it. And because they do not read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates. And the trend that the evangelical church knows the Bible less and less shows. People begin to believe that "God helps those who help themselves", and that "God just wants me to be happy", and that shapes the way they view all of moral living and worship. That leads to how Christians think through the social issues of the day, not with the tension of love, grace, and truth, but only through the half thought through principles of almost truth (things that sound wise or true but are NOT in the Bible). ***"We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs."***² The question is what we know and where we get our information.

What keeps you away from reading, studying, and learning the Bible? Has no one ever taught you? You don't have time? Its hard to understand? There is no immediate return when we study. We are not pastors, so we have other jobs. There is some validity to each of these. However, think about it this way. **1) You cannot commend what you do not know.** You cannot tell people about a Jesus you don't know, about good news you are not enjoying, and an object of worship that is foreign to you. **2) Most of these excuses do not fly in any part of your life** - What profession is there that someone is not trained, equipped, and up to speed on the latest codes and qualifications? What police officer can be trusted if he does not know the law? What accountant balances budgets without an understanding of tax codes and math? What doctor would you let cut you who's expertise comes from watching the entire *House M.D.* series? In other words, often we say that our relationship with Christ is ultimate, but then neglect the exact way to express and enjoy that relationship. When we do this, drift is inevitable, and the eclipse of the gospel will invariably follow.

The Preparation That Brings Reform (7:10)

*"For Ezra had **set his heart to study** the Law of the Lord, and **to do it and to teach** his statutes and rules in Israel."*

How was Ezra uniquely prepared for this task? It was not title nor position. It was that he sought the right foundation and pursued it relentlessly. This is the hope for all of us here today, and the hope for our children. Ezra was a qualified priest who worked in the "secular" world, being prepared for something great to come. We hope that we have hundreds of people who are equipped Biblically to enter into every discipline, who represent Christ with integrity and hard work, and are lights in the midst of crooked and perverse generations. We hope to graduate students who are not qualified to make a lot of money and get into prestigious universities as the highest goal, but to **know their Savior** through His Word and make much of Him in any field of study or industry they find themselves. This is the measure of success, and this is what we prepare for. Notice how Ezra went about this.

Passion

Ezra devoted himself. He was one of those "put my mind to it" kind of guys. That is how he rose through the ranks of a Persian governmental system and gained access to the king himself. But that was

² Albert Mohler, "The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: Its our problem." January 20, 2016.

a secondary drive. He was driven to study the Law. He **set his heart** to do this. The Biblical understanding of heart is more than just a volitional decision, but involves the emotions, affections, and desires. He believed that God called him to "**love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**" (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). There was no greater passion in his life even though there were secondary results from his faithfulness.

Knowing God through His Word was never intended to be easy, but it is possible. However, it will never happen without a distinct and clear prioritization of life. We are a product of what we devote ourselves to, and our passions will always be seen in these choices.

Study

He spent time in study. This is a hard term for some of us (ok, most of us). Study is not something we naturally like to do nor do we have time to do. We have different learning styles, but today, sitting in quiet contemplation and digging into Scripture is not easily attained. We are easily distracted. We live to multitask. We have so many things on the list of the tyranny of the urgent, that staying in one place for an extended period of time (without NETFLIX on in the background) feels like a waste of time. But here is the reality: **there ain't no shortcut in studying God's Word for ourselves.** Its like asking: "What's the quick way for me to become a lawyer, or a captain on the fire department, or a professional athlete?" The answer is hard work and discipline over time.

1) **It is supposed to take discipline** - "*Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. **Rather train (discipline) yourselves for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.***" (1 Tim. 4:7-8) Think of all the things you are willing to discipline or train yourself for. We train for competition and personal bests. We train to get qualifications on our jobs. We train to become efficient in our hobbies. None of these is bad, but they are not ultimate nor as important as training for godliness. And how does training for godliness work? **Being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed** (1 Tim. 4:6).

2) **It creates growing appetites** - "*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander. Like newborn infants, long for (crave) the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation ----if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*" (1 Pet. 2:1-3).

How many of us have a hard time with wanting to study? Sleep in a little longer, watch another show, or do a million other good things are easier calls to make. However, an appetite for Scripture grows when our appetite for Scripture is fed. Much like creating a craving for healthy food, our appetites are formed around what we feed ourselves. So how do we create a desire to study Scripture? We begin with disciplining ourselves to do it.

3) **Mediation is key to delight**- "*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, **but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.***" Psalm 1:1-2

We easily drift toward what we delight in. If you love athletics, it is not a grudging duty to watch a game on tv or to go to the stadium. If you love crafting, going to Jo-Ann's or Hobby Lobby is not equivalent to pulling teeth (I'm not saying it is for me, but close). If you delight in fishing, its not duty to daydream about the next catch or trip. If Scripture is our delight, we will seek to meditate, to dwell on, think about, mull over, munch on, and chew the proverbial cud of Scripture. When we looked at this verse with my daughters, I asked what it meant to meditate, to which one of my daughters put her hands in

the air, closed her eyes, and began a tribal hum at the dinner table. Good for a spit take, but not a good understanding of meditation.

The goal of meditation is to hide God's Word in our heart. To memorize so that we can recall, to understand so that we can begin thinking differently. We study so that the Spirit has something to work with. We meditate so that transformation can take place. We are all limited in how much time we can sit down and study, but we have unlimited time to meditate, since the Psalmist calls to do it "day and night".

Is this how you view Scripture? Do you have it hidden in your heart and at the forefront of your mind? Is it the last thought or first when you daydream?

Practice

There is a distinct and purposeful sequence or order here. Ezra ultimately sought to teach, but before He did this, he had to know. In between, he had to **practice** the truth. There is a word we have for people that preach one thing and do another, or who never practice what they preach: we call them *lawyers*....just kidding, we call them hypocrites. This has been the plight of churches, Christians, parents, and pastors for as long as the truth has been known. It is always easier to know than to do, and easier to tell than to show.

James 1:22-25 says "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in the mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he is like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*"

Notice the picture. A man who sees chocolate all over his face when he looks in the mirror, only to turn around and forget that it is there, is a man who does not change. The one who truly sees the Word of God for what it is, who is being transformed, whose mind is changing is a true doer. Studying Scripture as a believer facilitates and demands change. And this kind of change qualifies to us to teach. It will be blatantly obvious over time if we are studiers and doers of the Word as well. Just like we can tell if someone works out and eats well will have tangible results, so will someone who knows and obeys God's Word. They will have wisdom, perspective, integrity, obedience, submission, joy, peace, a true understanding of God, and a growing hatred of sin. They will have new appetites for worship, new desires to make Jesus known, and new motivations to love others. And each of these can only be faked for a while. Ultimately, the proof will always be in the pudding. We are either growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus or we are stagnating in pool of our own ignorance.

Teaching

In the culmination of these, Ezra began to teach. He had credibility from heritage and experience, but more importantly from a life of living out the realities of Scripture. He taught to clarify, to call to repentance, and called for reformation, a turning back to the Lord. This is the part where we often tune out, since we do not see ourselves as teachers of God's Word, since we have gifted people in the church to do that. However, every disciple maker is a teacher, and every Christian is a disciple maker. Every parent is a teacher, both in word and deed, and our kids are watching. We are called to make known the excellencies of Christ and the glories of God, which means we have to **know who we are commending**. All of us are called to teach. So all of us need to be devoted to study and to do the Word of God.