

Reform: Reformation Preparation - Part 2

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)

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

- 1) **57 years have passed between the end of chapter 6 and beginning of 7 -**
- 2) **Everything was trending up at the end of chapter 6 -**
- 3) **Ezra had asked to return, and it was granted to him**
- 4) **There was a drift happening -**
- 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 -**
 - **Ezra had credentials as a public figure**

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

Jeremiah 7:4-11 -

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

Scripture Is How We Know God Scripture Transforms our Minds

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 -**

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

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

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 for this we **prepare**.

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 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.

There are **two distinct prerequisites**:

1) We need the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10-13)

*"These things (wisdom of God, wisdom of the cross)God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God...now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, **that we might understand the things freely given by God.** And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught **by the Spirit interpreting spiritual truths** to those who are spiritual"*

2) We need to be born again (1 Cor. 2:14-16)

*"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and **he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.** The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord as to instruct Him?' **But we have the mind of Christ.**"*

The Word then, unlocks the Word: (1 Pet. 1:23-25)

*"...since you have been born again, not to perishable seed but of imperishable, **through the living and abiding word of God**, for "all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower fails, but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this **word is the good news that has been preached to you.**"*

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.

Why is this type of preparation and method of reform so important:

We are all called to make disciples:

We must be able to teach all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:19-20)

We must recognize that we are being prepared to go, even if we stay

We must recognize where the breakdowns happen - is it a matter of **desire, training, conviction, or communication**. Each of these can be overcome, but we must be honest about each.

Husbands and Fathers are called to lead this way:

This does not cut out wives and moms, but fathers have a unique opportunity and responsibility to do this (Eph. 5:26-26)

"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the **discipline and instruction of the Lord.**" (Eph. 6:4)

We are preparing the NEXT GENERATION to walk by faith:

There is a battle going on for the minds and hearts of our kids (Col. 2:8 - See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ"), and our enemy does not fight fair, but will use everything available to draw out hearts - both illicit wickedness in the forms of the offer of sexual freedom or guilt free sin, or more sinister ways, like living a good life, having enough money, getting a good education, having a cause, gaining the whole world, and losing ones soul!

We seek to root and establish our young people in the truth, built up in Him (Col 2:6-8) This is the only antidote to the battle for our kids hearts: we give them the Christ who has infinite worth and pleasure, who satisfies completely and gives true rest, and we do so through a **passion for God through his Word, relentless study, unyielding practice, and clear teaching.**

How do we get started?

- **Start small and consistent**
- **Ask someone to help you**
- **Pray that God would help you understand, then pray some more**
- **Read to have your mind and heart changed**
- **Utilize the resources of our church and broader available resources**

There is no revival, no great risk, no significant walk of faith without it being born out of devotion to Scripture. This week I was back in Atlanta with the Encompass World Partners Board, a group that prays, plans, and evaluates the direction of the mission in terms of its values and purpose. This is a group of passionate people who are willing to sacrifice time and resource to see something happen that is far greater than any one of us could do. We are a small organization by many standards, yet God has used this group of churches to start churches, make disciples, and see followers of Christ in 19 countries (with over 3000 churches worldwide). But at the beginning of the 1900's, there was exactly one country reached: The U.S.A.

At the national conference on September 4, 1900, Jacob Cassel challenged the Grace churches of North America to commit to reaching the nations with the gospel. This was met with the desire to start a committee to further talk it through over the next year. This was not enough for Jacob, and along with 52 others, they walked out of the meeting of thousands, and this small group started a movement that is now Encompass World Partners, reaching thousands of souls and planting thousands of churches to the glory of the nations.

What does it take for revival? What does it take to walk passionately and be ready for God to work through us? The same thing its always taken: we need to be prepared, ready to not only **know, but be ready to do what God calls us to.**

The question this morning: Are we ready to go? Are we ready to live passionately? If not now, when? What will it take for you to be ready? Salvation? Discipline? Training? Let's not wait on these things, but live like Ezra.