

## Conclusion To The Book Of Ezra

Ezra 4:7-23

February 16, 2014

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This Lord's Day we bring to a conclusion our study of the Book of Ezra. Because Ezra is a historical account inspired by the Holy Spirit and not a fairy tale, we do not read in the conclusion of this Book, "and they lived happily ever after." To the contrary, as we shall see today, God's people faced another time of trial in which the reformation that had been advanced by Ezra in the second return of Israelites from Babylonian captivity seemed to come to a screeching halt. But dear ones, this is so often how we observe the Lord sovereignly working out His most wise plan in biblical history, in extra-biblical history, and in our own lives. There are periods of reformation in which progress is made (for which we praise the Lord), but there are also follow many times in which reformation seems to stop or even to decline.

Dear ones, our hope and confidence must not be founded upon the progress we see (that's walking by sight), nor must discouragement and despair be lodged within the failure or halting of reformation that we see (that's also walking by sight). We are taught by these setbacks and by these periods of waiting to look to the promises of God (that's walking by faith), and to earnestly look for that reformation which God will yet work within our own hearts and lives by His abundant grace before moving us forward to the next step of reformation. God is using even our adversaries to reformation to sanctify us by sending us to Christ for His grace every step of the way.

One of Christ's faithful witnesses and martyrs who knew so well the trials that come with reformation (James Renwick) wrote how God uses our

enemies to be our greatest friends:

Glory in your present tribulation. Rejoice in your light affliction which is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot their fill (*The Life & Letters of James Renwick, Last Scottish Martyr*, Rev. W.H. Carlaw, p. 168).

May the Lord grant us likewise the grace to see those who oppose us through the lens of God's good providence.

Let us consider the following three main points in this concluding sermon to the Book of Ezra: (1) A Brief Overview Of Reformation In The Book Of Ezra; (2) Reformation Is Delayed And Brought To A Standstill (Ezra 4:7-23); (3) Important Lessons To Be Learned About Reformation From The Book Of Ezra.

## **I. A Brief Overview Of Reformation In The Book Of Ezra.**

A. First, let us not forget the gracious return of God's people from Babylonian captivity.

1. The Prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that God's people would remain in captivity for 70 years and then would be delivered from captivity and would return again to the Promise Land (Jeremiah 29:10).

2. In amazing fulfillment of this express prophecy, God sovereignly and lovingly returned His people after 70 years in three stages: (1) King Cyrus issued his decree (in Ezra 1) to set the Jews free, and they set out in 537 B.C. to begin reformation in Jerusalem by rebuilding the temple under Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the high priest); (2) King Artaxerxes issued his decree (in Ezra 7) to send another band of reformers back to Jerusalem in order to promote further reformation in 458 B.C. under Ezra; and (3) King Artaxerxes issued

another decree to send yet another great reformer (Nehemiah) back to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. (which is recorded in Nehemiah 2).

B. Secondly, let us remember in the Book of Ezra (a Book about biblical reformation) the trials that were faced at each stage of reformation. A biblical reformation in church, state, family, or in your individual lives, dear ones, is never easy, comfortable, and without hardship and trial. Biblical reformation involves much blood, sweat, and tears. This runs so contrary to popular Christianity which turns to the left or turns to the right in order to live as comfortably and undisturbed as possible in their Christian life. But what we have learned from our study in the Book of Ezra is that the Lord brings reformation by uncomfortable, disturbing, difficult trials, setbacks, delays, and afflictions in order to drive us out of our own selfish desires and our own vain resources and unto to Christ. Jesus made this clear when He declared, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). And remember Paul affirms the same thing when he writes, “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). The words of the learned and godly Rev. Samuel Rutherford bring out this truth as well:

Oh! how easy is it to deceive ourselves, and to sleep, and wish that heaven may fall down in our laps! Yet for all my Lord’s glooms, I find Him sweet, gracious, loving, kind; and I want [lack—GLP] both pen and words to set forth the fairness, beauty, and sweetness of Christ’s love, and the honour of this cross of Christ, which is glorious to me, though the world thinketh shame thereof. I verily think that the cross of Christ would blush and think shame of these thin-skinned worldlings, who are so married to their credit that they are ashamed of the sufferings of Christ (*Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, “Letter LXVII”, p. 145, Banner of Truth Trust).

1. **Ezra 4:1-6.** After returning to the land of Israel under Zerubbabel (the governor) and after having laid the foundation of the temple with great joy and praise to God, God’s people were approached by certain adversaries from within the land who worshipped Jehovah (but

also incorporated doctrines and worship not authorized by God). How often trial comes after some advance in reformation. This was a trial sent by God to test whether a unity that embraces a compromise of God's truth would lead God's people astray from God's revealed religion (whether they would join hands for the sake of unity with those who had departed from the true religion revealed by God). These adversaries wanted to work together in a unified effort with God's people to rebuild the temple. However, Zerubbabel rightly refused such a compromised reformation with those who did not adhere to the commandments of God (even if they claimed to worship the same God). Having then been rebuffed by Zerubbabel, the adversaries showed their true colors and hired counselors in high places within the Persian government to frustrate the progress of reformation. This was a temptation and trial for God's people to enlarge their ranks by compromising the truth. Unity—but at what price?

2. **Ezra 5-6.** God's people went through a period of lukewarmness to the reformation to which God had called them after the foundation of the temple was laid, but the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, were mightily used of the Lord to awaken Israel from her worldly preoccupation with her own pleasures and employments to the exclusion of God's reformation of the true religion revealed in Scripture. And just as the Jews began with renewed zeal to continue rebuilding the temple, Tatnai, the governor of the provinces west of the Euphrates River, stopped the work until King Darius was informed and gave his royal approval of their work, which approval was finally given after a further delay in the cause of a biblical reformation.

3. **Ezra 7-10.** The Lord then laid on the heart of King Artaxerxes to send and equip Ezra, the priest and scribe, with resources from the royal treasury to Israel to continue work of a biblical reformation in Israel. Enemies laid wait to ambush them along

reformation road (a four-month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem). After arriving and continuing the work of reformation, Ezra was blindsided by the astonishing report that a number of the men of Israel (including princes and priests) had taken idolatrous women from the heathen lands around them (to be their wives). God did not consider these women to be lawful wives and commanded (through His prophet, Ezra) the guilty men to repent, to covenant with the Lord, and to send away these idolatrous women, in order that the faithful seed of God's covenant people might not be mixed and compromised, and in order that the true biblical religion might be extended to succeeding generations. The idolatrous women were sent away, and the Lord did not send His people as captives out of the land (as they deserved). This was a temptation and trial to hinder reformation by backsliding from God's covenant and commandments given to His people.

4. Thus, we see that reformation was (by various means) delayed, procrastinated, prevented, and resisted after the return of God's people to Israel from Babylonian captivity. However, the theme of Ezra is that despite all such hindrances to a biblical reformation, the sovereign God, the merciful God, uses each and every hindrance in the life of His people to teach them and to train them to look in faith to the Lord and not at the circumstances all around them.

a. On the one hand, when reformation is going well, we are not to place our confidence in what we see, for providential hindrances and obstacles may be just around the corner to test our faith in the Lord, our love for His commandments, and our perseverance in turning not to the right hand or to the left hand, but walking in the good old paths of righteousness and truth in which our faithful forefathers walked.

b. On the other hand, when reformation is slow, has stopped, or is headed in the wrong direction altogether, once again we

are not to place our hope in what we can see, for providential progress and success may be just around the corner to test our faith in the promises of God and our hope in the prophecies of the Lord (who will bring the nations to Jesus Christ at His appointed time).

## II. **Reformation Is Delayed And Brought To A Standstill (Ezra 4:7-23).**

A. It may seem that when we reach Ezra 10:44 (the last verse in the Book of Ezra) there is nothing more in the Book of Ezra that happened. But I would submit, that does not seem to be the case. For after the many cases were adjudicated, involving men who had taken idolatrous women as lovers, and after these idolatrous lovers were sent away (as we have noted they were in previous sermons), I would submit that we have not yet finished the historical account in the Book of Ezra as to what followed after this. Actually, an earlier section in the Book of Ezra (Ezra 4:7-23) would seem to follow the account of sending away the idolatrous lovers (in Ezra 10). And so let us turn back to Ezra 4:7-23, where we shall see, that once again, after a biblical reformation seems to be moving forward (when the idolatrous lovers were sent away), another seeming setback is interposed by our sovereign Lord in the road to a biblical reformation.

B. Ezra 4:1-5 introduces certain adversaries in Samaria who sought to hinder the work of reformation during the reign of **King Darius**. Ezra 4:6 then continues the same theme of adversaries who were hired to frustrate the work of reformation during the reign of **King Ahasuerus** or Xerxes (who followed King Darius). And then we come to Ezra 4:7, where still the adversaries of God's people are yet seeking relentlessly to hinder the work of reformation during the reign of **King Artaxerxes** (who ruled after King Ahasuerus). This is the same Artaxerxes that sent Ezra to Israel

to promote reformation in Ezra 7, but was apparently misled by wicked counselors to halt that reformation in Ezra 4:7-23.

1. Now as we consider this renewed attempt by adversaries to stop biblical reformation in Israel (in Ezra 4:7-23), the timing as to when this occurred would seem to fit chronologically after the idolatrous wives are sent away and before the same King Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah to complete the rebuilding of the walls and the city of Jerusalem (in Nehemiah 1-2).

2. Why do I say this?

a. In Nehemiah 1:2-3, the news shared with Nehemiah from some Jews who had just returned from Jerusalem was that God's people are in "great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (which would connect with what is stated in the letter of Rehum to King Artaxerxes about the Jews having begun the work of rebuilding the walls and the city, but due to the royal decree of King Artaxerxes all the work on the city and walls of Jerusalem was stopped, and thus the city of Jerusalem was yet in great disrepair, Ezra 4:11-13,16).

b. Thus, the historical reason why Nehemiah was so sad about the disrepair of the walls and city of Jerusalem was because all work to rebuild the walls and city of Jerusalem had been discontinued. The adversaries of the Jews in high places (Rehum and Shimshai) persuaded King Artaxerxes to bring reformation to a halt in Jerusalem in Ezra 4:7-23. And so the Book of Ezra comes to an end on that sad note in Ezra 4:7-23. But the vain purposes of man will not foil the sovereign and eternal plan of God, for the Lord will raise up a Nehemiah thereafter and will turn the heart of King Artaxerxes to favor God's people once again by sending another great reformer to Jerusalem: first, Ezra; and then Nehemiah. The enemies of God and His people think they have destroyed

reformation, but then he raises up a Luther; after that a Calvin; and then a Knox.

3. Thus, it would seem that the Book of Ezra actually ends historically with another divinely-appointed delay in biblical reformation. But with the third return of Jews from captivity (under Nehemiah), once again biblical reformation is continued. And so it goes for us as well—not to discourage us, but to encourage us that we are not alone—this has been the lot ordained by the Lord for God’s people throughout history. The Apostle Paul preached to recent converts (not those mature in the faith) that is through much tribulation we enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Our firm hope, dear ones, is not in this passing world, but in the immovable Rock of our salvation (Jesus Christ).

### **III. Important Lessons To Be Learned About Reformation From The Book Of Ezra.**

A. The Book of Ezra reveals that God is sovereign and controls kings, empires, adversaries, delays, and even the backsliding of His people, and even uses these to promote reformation. God will not be thwarted by the plots and conspiracies and wickedness of even the most powerful in the world. The Lord almighty reigns, let all the earth be silent. The Lord almighty reigns, let all His enemies flee before Him. It is no more difficult for our God to turn the evil heart of a Cyrus or the wicked heart of an Artaxerxes to perform His holy purposes in setting His people free from Babylonian captivity than it is to turn the rebellious heart of the chief of sinners unto Christ. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will” (Proverbs 21:1). Let not your faith rest in the power of man, in the riches of this world, in the wisdom of the scholar, or in the righteousness of your own heart, for there is no hope of help and salvation in any of these. The Lord



of heaven is mighty to save. There is hope, dear one, for you. That trial, that affliction, that adversary inside or outside, that heavy burden, that sin that overwhelms you, that unsaved loved one—it doesn't matter how great the trial is. Your God is infinitely greater. He is YOUR God, in order that you might know Him personally everyday to be that Almighty God who works every day that which is impossible for man.

B. The Book of Ezra reveals that reformation may be slow, but it is always certain. Reformation may seem to be one step forward and two steps backward at times, but reformation will come to the church, to the nation, to the family, and to your own individual life. We cannot put a timetable upon reformation—even though we should work incessantly and zealously for it. The cause is God's not ours, and He works according to His own divine calendar rather than according to ours. Thus, we must be steadfast, patient, and persevering, because this is a life-long work. We are so given to instant gratification in our culture. We expect to see results immediately, or we're ready to quit. Reformation is not a sprint, it is a marathon—and you will win this race as you throw off every weight and sin that so easily beset you, in order that you might run this race with patience and perseverance of faith in Christ, love for Christ, and obedience to Christ, who has already faithfully run and completed His race and awaits us at that finish line with loving embraces and kisses in our heavenly home. He finished the race for us that we might have confidence that we too will finish the race by His power, love, and grace. Dear ones, there will be no regrets when we have finally finished the race, for all that we have sacrificed, for all that we have left behind, and for all that we have forsaken in order to follow Christ (Philippians 3:8).

C. The Book of Ezra reveals the unfailing love of God for His people (even after their backsliding and taking into the hearts and homes

forbidden lovers). The love of God for you, His beloved, knows no boundaries. The love of God for you, His beloved, will not stop reformation in your life until you are fully conformed into His glorious likeness and image. That's the power of God's infinite love. We can only expect reformation in our lives and in our families because of God's amazing and unstoppable love for His people. Why does God choose to use such weak, failing, unlovable creatures (like you and me) to advance His cause and reformation? Because as reformation moves forward by means of such faltering creatures who are saved by grace through faith alone in Christ and His righteousness alone, greater glory goes to the Lord of glory. **The weakness of the vessel in accomplishing much for Christ reveals the love of Christ for that weak vessel.** Dear ones, what is the greatest motive in us to promote reformation, to lead others to Jesus Christ, to exercise ourselves to godliness, to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ? With Paul we declare, "the love of Christ for us constrains us" to love Him, to sacrifice all to follow Him in promoting a biblical reformation (2 Corinthians 5:14). Dear ones, we love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). At the heart of a biblical reformation is God's love for us (His beloved bride), and our love for Him and our neighbor. Without it, there will be no reformation (1 Corinthians 13). Samuel Rutherford declares in his Letters during house arrest for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Love, love (I mean Christ's love), is the hottest coal that ever I felt. Oh, but the smoke of it be hot! Cast all the salt sea on it, it will flame; hell cannot quench it; many many waters will not quench love. Christ is turned over to His poor prisoner in a mass and globe of love. I wonder that He should waste so much love upon such a waster as I am; but He is not waster, but abundant in mercy (*Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, "Letter CLII", p. 283, Banner of Truth Trust).

Amen.

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