

A Biblical Reformation Requires That Which Is Necessary—

Not That Which Is Easy

Ezra 8:1-20; Joshua 9:16

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In the Book of Ezra, the Lord gives to us biblical principles that are necessary for a covenanted reformation. Dear ones, we are not only considering reformation from a historical perspective in looking back in time, we are considering reformation from a present and future perspective as we take the same biblical principles and use them to lay the foundation for reformation in our families, in our church, and in the nations of this world. Here is God's blueprint for a biblical reformation.

We would not think of building a house without a blueprint that would direct us in constructing a house that we intend to last a lifetime (and then to be passed on to our posterity after us). So likewise, dear ones, we cannot think of building a covenanted society wherein Jesus Christ rules and reigns supreme in family, church, and state, if we do not follow God's blueprint that is found in His written Word (especially in the Book of Ezra and the reformation God directed His people to accomplish in Israel at that time).

We have just completed Chapter 7 of Ezra, where the Lord lays out principles of reformation for church and state. The Gentile King, Artaxerxes, and his predecessors, have been led by the Lord to decree and to fund from the royal treasury all that was needed to bring a covenanted reformation in church and state in Israel. The Gentile King has in his royal letter (in Ezra 7) decreed that the needed manpower be raised by God's people through offering themselves and their resources as voluntary freewill offerings to the Lord. The royal authority to bring reformation has been declared by Artaxerxes. The needed resources to bring reformation have been made available. The manpower to accomplish has been called for. Now it is up to God's people to respond by faith, in love, and in obedience to the call to promote reformation in Israel.

But as we shall see from our text this Lord's Day, many are called, but few are willing to leave the comfort of their lifestyle in order to face the hard and difficult challenges that will no doubt confront individuals and families who (like Moses) esteem "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (or in this case, the treasures in Babylon at the time of Ezra). Dear ones, the Lord Jesus is still calling His people today to be willing to leave that which is comfortable in order to take up His cross and to promote a biblical reformation in the family, church, and state. Our resources and manpower may certainly seem small to the human eye, but, dear ones, our God is not limited in resources or manpower in the least—He owns it all. It is only our own lack of faith in Christ's promises and our own unwillingness to count the cost in loving obedience to God's commandments that hinder us in bringing reformation to our families, to Christ's Church, and to the nations of this world.

The main points from our text in Ezra 8:1-20 this Lord's Day are: (1) A List of Those Who Left the Comforts of Babylon to Promote Reformation (Ezra 8:1-14); (2) A Group That Was Conspicuously Missing from the List of Volunteers (Ezra 8:15-20).

I. A List of Those Who Left the Comforts of Babylon to Promote Reformation (Ezra 8:1-14).

A. The first observation that I would like to make about the list of names found in Ezra 8:1-14 is how few returned with Ezra in comparison to the much greater number that returned with Zerubbabel in Ezra 2.

1. There were three distinct returns of God's people from exile (all occurred under Persian Kings): (1) The first return of God's people from exile was decreed by the Medo-Persian King, Cyrus, with Zerubbabel leading the Jews back to Israel (between 538 and 537 b.c.); (2) The second return of God's people from exile was decreed by the Persian King, Artaxerxes, with Ezra leading the Jews back to Israel (in 458 b.c.); and (3) The third return of the Jews from exile was decreed as well by the same Persian King, Artaxerxes, with Nehemiah appointed to take that group of Jews back to their national heritage (in 444 b.c.).

2. Approximately 80 years have now elapsed since the first return under Zerubbabel as Ezra prepares to lead the second group of God's covenant people back to the land the Lord gave to them. But there is a striking decrease in the number of those who returned under Ezra (in Ezra 8) than returned under Zerubbabel (in Ezra 2). As we compare the number of Israelites that voluntarily chose to return with Zerubbabel in order to advance a covenanted reformation in Israel (in Ezra 2:64-65), we see that there was a total of **49,697** (by adding the numbers in Ezra 2:64 to the numbers in Ezra 2:65); whereas the number of Israelites that voluntarily chose to return with Ezra in order to advance a covenanted reformation in Israel (in Ezra 8:1-20), was only 1,687 recorded males. Now even if we assume that these 1,687 males were married males with families (which we are not told was the case), let's multiply ease of these 1,687 males by 10 (which is a good size family), in which case we still only arrive at a sum total of 16,870 that returned with Ezra in comparison with the nearly 50,000 that returned with Zerubbabel. Even with such liberal calculations, it would still be less than one-third of the number that returned under Ezra than returned under Zerubbabel. After 80 years (since the first return from exile), during which time the number of Jews in the provinces of Persia would no doubt have expanded greatly (as they did with the Israelites in Egypt), the number of those who are willing to offer themselves and their possessions as a freewill offering to the Lord in returning to Israel in order to advance a biblical, covenanted reformation has decreased by thousands upon thousands (rather than increasing by thousands upon thousands).

3. How do we explain this mind-boggling mathematical decrease? Why would God's people in exile not voluntarily offer themselves as freewill offerings to advance a covenanted reformation when King Artaxerxes even promised all of the resources, gave his royal encouragement to this good work, and provided whatever help God's people would need to accomplish this most important work in advancing God's Kingdom upon earth?

a. We are not specifically given a reason/reasons in our text, but based upon the fact that later in our text (Ezra 8:15-20), even the Levites had to be commanded by Ezra to come with him to serve in the Temple (in assisting the Priests), it would seem most likely that God's people had grown very comfortable over the past 80 years in the lives they had established in Babylon and in other Persian Provinces (even Jews like Esther had served as Queen, and her cousin, Mordecai, had been exalted to the second place in government in Persia not many years before Ezra leads a second group of God's people from exile). Rather than swelling the ranks of those returning, or rather than Ezra having to turn people away because so many were zealous to advance a biblical reformation in Israel, God's people most likely did not want to uproot themselves from their homes, families, and occupations that they had established in exile. They were at ease, and returning to Israel would mean leaving behind so much for which they had worked so hard to obtain. Dear ones, in light of this, what a badge of honor for God to include those names found in this hall of fame of those who were willing to sacrifice all their comforts in order to endure the long, arduous, and dangerous four-month trip back to Israel, and who were willing to start over in order to promote a biblical reformation in Israel.

b. But at the same time, what a shame to be excluded from that honorable list of names because God's people were unwilling to leave behind the comforts of this life in order to further a biblical, covenanted reformation. Dear ones, we can either find our names in such a hall of fame for our willingness and faithfulness to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ in advancing His Kingdom, or we can find our names in a hall of shame for our apathy, indifference, and procrastination in choosing to

tightly cling to the comforts of this life at the expense of offering ourselves as a living sacrifice for Christ in promoting a biblical reformation of the family, church, and state. There is a reason God included the names of those who followed Ezra to advance a covenanted and biblical reformation in Israel: God wanted these people to be honored above others, because they had honored God above others.

B. We have first observed from this list of names (in Ezra 8:1-14) the honor bestowed by God upon a few who voluntarily forsook the comforts of this life for the sake of Christ in order to promote a biblical reformation in Israel, but now we observe secondly from this list of names (in Ezra 8:1-14) the importance of the family in promoting a biblical reformation. We have in the previous Chapter (Ezra 7) observed the important role that Ecclesiastical Shepherd-Leaders and Civil Shepherd-Leaders have by way of God's institution in advancing a biblical, covenanted reformation, but I submit to you that the backbone that holds together a biblical reformation in church and state is the Christian family that prays for, supports, and works to promote and advance reformation in church and state by training and preparing the very one who will fill those positions in church and state to promote a biblical reformation.

1. In the list of names found in Ezra 8:1-20, we find men, who are the heads of families that God honors by recording their names in Holy Scripture for all generations to behold. These men (as faithful shepherd-leaders within their homes) were not sitting back comfortably upon their successes, accomplishments, and comforts, but were willingly offering all of their successes, accomplishments, and comforts upon the altar as a sacrifice that God delights to smell in the lives and families of His people. Dear ones, we cannot win in a tug-of-war with the Lord over the earthly comforts of this life—we cannot out-tug the Lord. It all belongs to the Lord. We are His stewards, but when the Lord takes it back, it is our calling as stewards (not owners), to let go and to commit ourselves and our families into the safe-keeping of the Lord. With Job, may we declare in humble trust before God, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

2. Dear married men, we need to gather our families around us and to sincerely ask our wives and children, what they see within our family that needs to be reformed in our family by way of encouraging loving relationships within the family, by way of establishing godly priorities in financial stewardship, by way of steps that we can take to be a godly family that is growing in its love for all of God's truth and is endeavoring to practice God's truth in our lives and home. Men, our families are our garden in which we are to cultivate good fruit that glorifies God and to protect from all adversaries (especially ourselves). These are the types of steps we must be willing to take, men, if we are serious about a biblical, covenanted reformation. Reformation must begin in our own personal lives and families, before the church and state will be reformed.

3. Dear single men, you may be a family of one at the present time. How are you caring for your garden in cultivating the soil and sowing good seed that will bear fruit? How are you protecting your garden from the weeds (sins and bad habits) that spring up so easily that would choke out the good seed? Are you clinging so tightly to certain ambitions and goals in this life that you cannot let go and give it entirely over to the Lord to be used for His glory as He sees fit, or to be taken away if He sees fit?

4. Dear women (single and married alike), please understand that the reformation in Israel would have been greatly hindered if the women would have refused to join their husbands and fathers in leaving behind the comforts of this life in order to advance a biblical, covenanted reformation in Israel. Dear Christian women, you can either advance or you can hinder reformation by your willingness or unwillingness to follow and encourage your husbands, as they follow Christ. The Lord even gives to Christian wives the wonderful promise that they may win their own husbands to Christ without a word, by their godly life and conversation (1 Peter 3:1). Dear Christian women, how can the importance of your place in the reformation of the home be minimized, when it is you that spend the most time educating, training, and guiding your children

to trust in and to follow Christ and His Word? A biblical, covenanted reformation is realized by the power of the Gospel and the Spirit of God as each of you (husbands and wives, fathers, mothers, and children) in your respective, God-given roles in the family, daily pray with and for one another, serve one another in love and gratitude for all that Christ has given to you, and offer your lives and all that you posses daily as a freewill offering to Christ to be used as He sees fit.

II. A Group That Was Conspicuously Missing from the List of Volunteers (Ezra 8:15-20).

A. First, let us acquaint ourselves with what the Holy Spirit has recorded concerning the Levites who were missing.

1. Ezra establishes a rally point or location (at some place along the Ahava River according to Ezra 8:15), where all those Israelite families who are committed to a biblical, covenanted reformation in Israel may congregate before setting out for their four-month trip (according to Ezra 7:9). But as all the families gather and the names of heads of families are recorded in the honorable list (found in Ezra 8:1-14), Ezra learns that there are no Levites or families of the Levites who have willingly chosen to leave their earthly comforts behind in order to advance reformation in Israel. There are a couple Priests mentioned in Ezra 8:2 (Gershom and Daniel), but no Levites to assist the Priests in the administration of their ecclesiastical duties in the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

2. The Levites were God's appointed Church Officers, who were given various duties related to the care and maintenance of the Temple and of the worship of God's people. Without a reasonable number of Levites to assist the Priests, the work of reformation in Israel would be greatly hindered, because the Priests themselves would have to be taken away from many of their unique duties in worship and would then be tasked with doing what were the duties of the Levites. Sadly, the problem was not that there were not enough Levites and their families to assist the Priests in advancing a biblical, covenanted reformation in Israel. The problem was that the Levites did not want to go; apparently, they did not want to leave behind their earthly comforts. They were comfortably settled in their homes and with their families, and did not want to fulfill their God-ordained commission in advancing the Cause of Christ for the glory of God and for the edification of God's people in advancing reformation.

3. I wonder how often it is the case that such worldly concerns become a significant motivation in the lives of Ministers, Elders, and Deacons in being unwilling to take a stand for Christ and His truth in promoting a biblical, covenanted reformation. I remember a conversation I had with a Minister of a large church (while I was still in seminary). We were discussing a particular doctrine over which we disagreed. After discussing the reasons why the doctrine he embraced was unbiblical, he said to me (as if this was a strong reason not to change his view), "If I were to alter my position, I would lose my church." I fear that such a view is not that uncommon among Ministers. Some fear losing their salary, their pension, and their home; they fear having to move their family, and having to look for another church or another job. And so Ministers like the Levites of old may cling to that which is comfortable, rather than letting it go in order to be faithful to Christ and His truth. When that happens, we Ministers have accepted a bribe (simony), and have exchanged our birthright for a pot of stew. The same may be true when you singles are willing to compromise Christ truth in order to marry one to whom you are attracted, when you are willing to compromise your testimony for Christ and His Sabbath in order to have a promotion at work, or when you are willing to compromise your testimony for Christ against the celebration of Romish holydays (like Christmas and Easter) in order not to offend family and friends. You see, we all face the temptation to cling to that which is comfortable in this life at the expense of laying down our life for Christ in order to advance the Gospel and Cause of Christ.

B. Next, observe from our text that these Levites were only moved to forsake the comfort of their homes and lifestyles when a command from Ezra (with the authority of the King behind it) was issued in Ezra

8:17-19. How sad it is when only the threat of judgment will motivate officers in Christ's Church to perform their duty. The job of a Minister, Elder, or Deacon is always difficult, because faithfulness to Christ and to His truth may indeed bring serious consequences upon them and their families. But how can Church Officers lead others when they are only motivated by the severity of a command or the threat of judgment? How can they go before the flock and lead the flock when their heart is not in serving Christ and in leading the flock entrusted to them into a biblical, covenanted reformation in each soul, each family, in the church, and in the state? Dear ones, when it is only the threat of judgment that moves us to fulfill our duties (rather than the grace and love of Christ), there will not find joy and delight in our service.

C. Finally, from our text, I want to say something very briefly about the Nethinims in Ezra 8:20. Our text says that they were appointed by David to assist the Levites. Just as the Levites were to assist the Priests, so the Nethinims were to assist the Levites.

1. What was the origin of the Nethinims? These are the very people, whose ancestors (the Gibeonites) tricked Joshua and the Elders of Israel into making a covenant with them in order that they would not be destroyed (Joshua 9:16). They deceived Israel into believing that they had come from a far distant land, as evidenced by their moldy bread and tattered and worn garments. When they were detected and found to be near neighbors, the Gibeonites confessed what they had done. God, however, preserved them, and they became servants within Israel. Some 500 years later, David appointed the Gibeonites to be assist in the Temple, and it would appear that they were then given the name Nethinims, which means in Hebrew, "the given ones", for they were given to the service of God's House and God' Church. Here was a group of people, who had a very despised and lowly beginning, but who continued to faithfully serve in the most menial positions in Israel, until David appointed them to their work in the Church of God.

2. Dear ones, there are those within Christ's Church who have come to Christ from lowly or even criminal backgrounds. God delights to use those of the lowest backgrounds and to make of them the children of God and trophies of His grace in order to exalt the amazing grace of Christ and the righteousness of Christ in rescuing even the chief of sinners. The Nethinims were also needed to advance the biblical, covenanted reformation in Israel. God had chosen a place of service for even them. They no doubt could exclaim with David in Psalm 84:10: "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." God is not more of a Father to the advantaged and gifted in Christ's Church than He is to the disadvantaged and lowly in Christ's Church. You are called to advance the Kingdom of Christ and to promote a biblical reformation in your own lives, in your families, in the Church, and in the State (whether you are young or old, whether you are male or female, whether you are advantaged or disadvantaged in your background). God calls each of you to be willing to let go of the comforts of this life in order to be used by God to advance the glorious Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and to bring a biblical reformation beginning in your life, then extending to your family, Christ's Church, and the nations of this world.

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