

Study in Ezra 9

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[0 : 00] was to re-establish on a firmer footing the worship of God in Jerusalem.

And his main purpose, therefore, in Jerusalem, was similar to that of Elijah's many years before. His main purpose was to call the people back to the worship of God, a work of moral and spiritual reformation.

And remember that that in itself indicates to us that things had taken a very serious turn for the worship in Jerusalem, spiritually, after the completion of the temple.

And that, of course, will become the main thrust of this address tonight. Remember, too, that chronologically it will help you to understand the historical setting of some of these books if you bear in mind that Esther was an all probability in Persia during that period of silence, during that 50 to 60 year period between the completion of the temple and Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

And it's interesting to note that if that is the historical setting of Esther, it is interesting to note that in the hand of God, under the hand of God, she was responsible for preserving a life amongst the Jews, and perhaps even Nehemiah, and maybe Sarubabal and Joshua, if not Sechariah and Haggai.

[2 : 10] Now, the Ezra returned then to work this work of reformation in Jerusalem. And chapter 9, together with the reference that we have in the prophecy of Malachi, chapter 9 tells us something of the reason for the first point we'll take here tonight, Ezra's sorrow.

We read here that he discovered that the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites had not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing accord with their abomination. For they had taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, so that the Holy Seat had mingled themselves with the people of these lands.

And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. Then were assembled unto me everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away.

And I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. Now, here we have an indication of Ezra's sorrow.

Now, what caused it? One of the verses tell us, broad outline, the reason for it. And as I said, the prophecy of Manichai fills in here many of the blanks.

[3 : 39] Quite simply, things had changed dramatically from the heady days of the heady days when the temple was completed.

Remember that at the end of chapter 6, there you've got an indication of the great enthusiasm, and the great zeal, and the great commitment and consecration of the people of Jerusalem.

Together with the tremendous spirit of revival that had worked, obviously through the ministry of Seheriah and Haggai, how even many of the heathen people around them had been brought by the power of the truth into their own fellowship.

References made to that at the end of chapter 6. These had been great days in Jerusalem.

They had been tremendously helped and encouraged by the word of the Lord to them through Haggai, that the glory of this house that they were building, that this house would see greater glory than the glory of the former temple, Solomon's temple.

[5 : 12] They had that promise to assure them. And they had worked in accordance with that promise, and God had greatly blessed them.

And it may have been the case that when Ezra left Persia, that his mind would have been filled with a spirit of anticipation on the way to Jerusalem, on this four-month journey that he took from Persia to Jerusalem.

But what a shock awaited him when he got there. The dedication and the consecration of the earlier days had been replaced by backsliding.

And this was reflected in many ways. It was reflected, as we read here at the beginning of chapter 9, in intermarriage between the Jews and the semi-pagan and the Samaritan races that surrounded Jerusalem.

Now, the thing about this, as chapter 9 tells us, and as Ezra's prayer indicates very clearly in chapter 10, the thing about this is that it was rooted in Israel's history that they were not, at the command of God, they were not to associate with the semi-pagan races that surrounded them.

[6 : 36] This had been a clear instruction from God to the Jews. They were to keep themselves separate.

And Ezra referred to that in chapter 10. And because of that, Monarchi indicates to us also that the people had become careless and contemptuous, even of their normal duties, with reference to the temple, to the house of God.

They were adopting the kind of attitude that is prevalent today. Well, so what? When the prophet Ramah said it with them in the name of God, they replied contemptuously, Where are we, the Son of God?

What have I done wrong? What's the matter? What's so different? Why are the fuss? This is the way that they responded.

If you read through the first two chapters of Monarchi, you will see how prevalent that spirit had become in Jerusalem.

[7 : 53] And so their whole attitude could be really summed up by saying that they had become totally careless of God's command and God's demands.

They had become negligent and indifferent to the claims of God. They had become materialistic.

Some of them had actually entered into marriage relationships so that they could benefit themselves materially. The dominant thinking became to acquire as much land and property as they could.

And if the marriage would lead to this, well, they would enter into it irrespective of what God had said to them.

And because of that, divorce had become right in Jerusalem. They were prepared to divorce the wives so that they could marry someone else to get more land and more property.

[8 : 57] You get all that referred to in Malachi. The spirituality had gone by the board.

And when Esra arrived in Jerusalem, he discovered a place of spiritual darkness where decreation prevailed.

And as he himself indicates and as Malachi indicates, this failure on their part, the spiritual malaise which had overtaken them, was showing itself in the various ways that I have indicated.

When you apply this in a spiritual sense to our own lives, you will see how easily it can be applied.

It becomes all too common amongst Christian people for enthusiasm and dedication and prayerfulness and consecration to degenerate, to decline, so that all that is replaced by spiritual sloth.

[10 : 20] Joys become duties. These people, 50 to 60 years before that, were full of the joy of the Lord. But now, they were reacting to God through his messengers by saying, where have we robbed God?

Where have we dishonoured God? How have we failed God? And you know, it's a terrible commentary on anyone's spiritual state when he or she isn't aware of many ways in which God has been robbed and God has been dishonoured.

It is said that when people fall into the spiritual degeneration, and I quote, that they presently find that they have other duties to attend to and other engagement to fulfil that replace God's demands.

And they are no longer able, for example, to go to prayer or to come to prayer. And frequently, excuses are made and devices are employed to extricate them from what is now an unwelcome and a weary sin.

An exercise they are tired of the whole business. And you know, I wouldn't be surprised if there are times, occasions, in perhaps your own life, when it becomes a weariness, the thing that ought to be the delight becomes a wearisome exercise.

[12 : 12] the thing that ought to be viewed as a privilege becomes an awful burden. And this is one of the things that you and I have to guard against constantly.

It's tragic, for example, that at times of so-called revival, or I shouldn't say so-called, at times of revival, it was a time of revival in Jerusalem. It is tragic that people can be touched by the Spirit of God.

And that which has found the flame of spiritual enthusiasm in their hearts can die away and flicker until there's hardly a flame left and they lose interest.

And very often, that kind of a, that kind of experience that kind of exercise does more damage than good in the lives of people who are led to believe that the power of God has taken control and taken charge of their lives.

Well, these people had fallen into this kind of spiritual indolence. This spiritual malaise had settled over their spirits and they had become so indifferent to things of God that anything went.

[13 : 28] Now, very often, this is how a spiritual declension or backsliding shows itself. There are two ways, generally, it is claimed that there are two ways in which backsliding shows itself.

It shows itself and, strangely enough, the two, the two way, the two ways which it shows itself are quite opposed to one another. It can show itself, first of all, in a spirit of legalism and then it can show itself in a spirit of license.

I think that the history of the Christian church bears out that there is always a danger after a period of revival that when the church begins to, as it were, to settle back, to settle down, to get back to the old ways, when it loses its edge, its keenness, you always tend to find a spirit of legalism creeping into the church and creeping into the community.

I heard an old minister once saying, I believe it, I believe it, mind you, he knew more about this than I do because he was a product of revival. And he said that he attributed the legalism that came into this part of the world, into this island and in other places.

He attributed that to the spiritual deadness that settled over the church after a period of revival. And what happens in legalism is this, that people begin to make rules and regulations and establish taboos which they put up above the word of God and the lives of people and they make these things far more important than what the word of God says.

[15 : 16] You see, in revival, people's attention is directed to what the Lord is saying. They're taken up with the word of God. Their whole lives are motivated by the word of God. The joy of the Lord fills them and this is the means that God uses its own word.

Nothing is as important as the truth. But you see when backsliding comes, it's not the truth that becomes important at all.

It's what man says. It's what I say. What you say to me. And the fear of the Lord is replaced by the fear of man. And that is what happens when the church is dead.

It can be so dead that it becomes hidebound with legalism. It makes its own rules its own regulations.

And the bondage in which it is gripped becomes so severe that nothing will deliver it from the bondage of that legalism but a renewal of the power of God in its existence.

[16 : 31] Now, there's another way in which backsliding shows itself and this is the way it showed itself in Jerusalem. It showed itself in the opposite spirit and I think myself that this is just as dangerous and perhaps it may be more current with us than the other one.

The spirit of anything goes. carelessness leads a person into a life where he thinks that he is exercising Christian liberty but what he's doing is he's giving license to his own wants his own desires and again the same thing is operating.

It isn't the word of God that becomes dominant or paramount then it's what he thinks. It's what he thinks. what he will allow himself to do.

This is the thing in license. In legalism it's what the other person will not allow me to do. In license it's what I allow myself to do irrespective of what that other person thinks and then there is the wrong application of Paul's teaching in Corinthians particularly in Corinthians about Christian liberty and people intend to compromise their witness and their witness tends to become corrupted and in that situation it becomes well nigh impossible to distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian you don't know who a believer is and who is and what people used to refer to as the old style puritanism and remember there's a vast difference between puritanism and legalism never equate puritanism with legalism that pulls apart puritanism is the application of biblical teaching and biblical taboos not man-made ones but biblical ones to the liberty that one has in

Christ and a perhaps you may have come across what a fairly recent writer and evangelical circle said about this license there is an urge of neediness said in evangelicalism for a new puritanism in life and behavior not a call to the old legalism and bondage and taboos but a reinvestment of the biblical idea of separation with a new spiritual dynamic that will express the truth that this world is not our home that we are strangers on this earth and that we hope for a city whose builder and whose maker is God so it is that carelessness and deadness allow things that would once have shocked your own spirit now to come into your life and I don't think we should be afraid of the spirit of separation of the church from the world this became

[20 : 04] Ezra's great burden as it is seen in chapter 10 his ministry was one of calling the people back to God this was Elijah's ministry this was very often the prayer of the psalmist himself God take me back return me again to what I was and to what I ought to be and part of the difficulty with Ezra is trying to come to terms was the awful pain and the anguish and the sheer upset that these reforms that these things necessitated in the lives of the people especially in the priests it was a sad sad period in Israel's history not just spiritually but personally at the personal level there were many tragic stories in

Israel because of this separation was a painful thing people put away their wives families were broken up now when you read chapter 10 it's a tragic story it's a tragic account but why the tragedy because of the sins of the people why so much tragedy in your own life and in mine why but because of sin why the pain and why the anguish why the cost christian discipleship why because we have sinners following the lord that's why part of the reason and i'm sure some of you are tired of hearing this part of the reason why there is so little separation in the christian church today from the world is because the church isn't prepared to separate itself from the world that's the sum total of it because people are prepared to endure the pain and the anguish of having to cut oneself off from practices and pursuits.

And indeed at times from companies where the principles are highly questionable. And it was necessary for them, therefore, to cut themselves off.

And as was said, this is not the work of one day or of two days. That was what was said. When they all, Jeremiah and Esra was so sad. And he began this wonderful prayer that we have in chapter 9.

And this man with a burden and a prayerful spirit, he drew hundreds of people to himself. That was a tremendous thing that happened in Jerusalem. Hundreds of people swallowing around the area outside the temple in the pouring rain.

[23 : 06] And they realized that they had sinned against God. They realized that they had to put this right. It was on their own hands to cut themselves off from all these sin practices.

And God demanded it. And they were prepared to do it there and then until someone said, this can't be done in a day or two. This is going to take months. And it took nearly three months. And it can't be done in a pouring rain.

So people were set up, a committee structure was set up. And committees looked after a certain section of people. And others after this section. And after the next section. And the whole work became so thorough that it was accomplished.

Nine months, eight months roughly, after Ezra arrived back in Jerusalem. A year after he had set out from Persia to return to Jerusalem.

But at what a cost! What pain! What agony! What bitterness of spirit it evoked throughout the whole of Jerusalem.

[24 : 09] But then if you and I are to part with sin, that's the way it must be. Some of you here tonight, maybe find the Christian life a bit rough.

Perhaps, say, coming up against things that you didn't expect. And you think that if you were a Christian, that the pain wouldn't be as bad as this in your heart.

That the difficulty of cutting yourself off from sin wouldn't really be there if you were a Christian. Perhaps the death is the same to you if you were a Christian, you'd find it far worse than you are. Let me say this to you.

The older you get as you become as a Christian, the more difficult and the more painful penitence becomes. That is why repentance is always associated with tears and with bitterness in the Bible.

The older you become as a Christian, it doesn't make it any easier for you to disengage yourself from sin. The more you realize how much sin is part of your very being, so the more difficult it becomes.

[25 : 14] And that is why we have to remind ourselves constantly of what Jesus says to us in the Gospels. If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and dare to do it.

And dare to follow me. But what this, what this, I think, what it ought to do for us tonight is this. It ought, and I want to leave it here and leave the, conclude these series of lectures next Wednesday with a, with a, with a, with a, more detailed look at the, Ezra's prayer and the reforms that were carried out in Jerusalem.

But what it leaves us with tonight, what I want to leave you with tonight is this, really for each one of us, seriously, to look at our own lives and to assess how much of this spirit of man is and indifference and carelessness and indolence has crept over our spirit.

To find out that we have fallen into a trap into which better people than us fell. Fall into a trap of thinking that our license is really Christian liberty.

And I always, I feel myself that the pendulum in the Christian church, in the evangelical church today, has swung in the past 20 years from the legalism that tended to creep over the church then, I think it has swung far too much to the other extreme where almost anything got us now was in the Christian church.

[27 : 05] And I must say that I would far rather see, for example, young converts today, I would far rather see this spirit of separation, the spirit of separation becoming far, becoming more prevalent, more obvious than I fear it is.

Because no person will ever lose, and this is the point I want to make, no person will ever lose by separating himself as much as possible from the spirit and the principle and the practices of this world.

Christ and Belial were always opposed and always will be. So is the world and the Christian church, and we befriend it at our peril, at whatever level, or in whatever way.

And perhaps the words of the, I can't remember, was it Charles Wesley or Toplady again, my dear me, Isaac Watts, who spoke of these well-known words, Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?

Where is the soul refreshing you of Jesus and his word? What peaceful hours I once enjoyed. How sweet their memories still.

[28 : 44] But they have left an aching void the world can never fill. Perhaps, and I close with this, perhaps this is what you and I should say tonight, as we assess our own lives in the presence of God.

Return, O Holy Dove, return, sweet messenger of Christ. I hate the sins that made thee mourn and drove thee from my breast.

How many of us may this be true, that we have quenched the Holy Spirit, and that by our either legalism or indolence leading to indulgence and license that we may have driven the Holy Spirit from our hearts.

So shall my walk be close with God, calm and serene my frame, so pure light shall mark the road that leads me to the Laman.

On that road, you and I are exposed to dangers many of them that we know little of.

[29 : 59] and that's why I say that the safest path for any Christian, young or old, is to keep close to him in obedience to his revealed will.

Let us pray. Bless to us thy word and help us to put our trust in thy son. O may we love the Lord and confess, O God, our sins and failings and confess that we aren't as consecrated to thee as we ought to be.

And we fail so often to remember that the great call of God in his word to us, be ye holy, for I am holy. Forgive us, we pray thee and help us to put our trust in thee.

Go before us now and watch over each one of us for giving sin for Jesus' sake. Amen.