

Agent of God

Ezra 7:1-10

Now I know it was way back before Easter when we last took a look at the Book of Ezra. But that's okay, because verse 1 tells us there was a long break in the action at the end of chapter 6. In fact, it was a much longer break than we have taken.

You may recall that the first 6 chapters of the Book of Ezra tell the story of how the Temple of God was rebuilt after it had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar back in 586 B.C. The people had been carried off into exile in Babylon, but when the Persians conquered that kingdom, they allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and build the temple.

Well, in spite of much opposition – and after God had to send two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to get the people moving again – the end of chapter 6 finally saw the project brought to completion. That was in the year 515 B.C., some 20 years after the people had started to lay the foundations, and some 70 years after the first Temple had been destroyed.

So, the temple was completed, and along with it, the daily sacrifices were being offered. But Ezra didn't come to Jerusalem until 458 B.C., well over 50 years later. So, why the long delay? I mean, we know what eventually happened as a result of his ministry – a genuine revival broke out. People confessed their sins and turned back to God. So, why didn't Ezra come to Jerusalem earlier?

Well, we don't know why revivals break out when they do, and we don't know why God sometimes waits a long time between them. After all, it has been almost 160 years since the last nationwide revival swept through the armies that fought in the War for Southern Independence. And given the cultural decline that's taken place since then, a process that seems to be accelerating recently, can anyone doubt that we need a similar movement of God's spirit today?

And make no mistake – the author of this book, who turns out to be Ezra himself, gives all the credit to God for the success of his ministry. In verse 6 he acknowledges that he was only able to embark on the trip to Jerusalem "because the hand of the Lord his God" was upon him. Ezra thus understood that it was God who had given him favor with King Artaxerxes, the Persian ruler who allowed him to set out on his journey. In the same way, in verse 9 Ezra once again gives the credit to God for his safe arrival in Jerusalem, making it clear that "the good hand of his God" was upon him.

No, we cannot deny that God is the One Who raises up agents of revival in any age, from John Knox in Scotland, to Jonathan Edwards in New England, to Zebulon Butler in Port Gibson. We cannot doubt that God's will to refresh His people is done according to God's plan, and on God's schedule. So, the best thing we can do is what Jesus told us in our responsive reading – to pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send out laborers into His harvest field, agents of God like Ezra.

But of course, God's work of redeeming the lost goes on between revivals as well. And that means it's quite likely that God wants some of us to play at least a small part in bringing others into the Kingdom. It's possible that God wants us to be His agents as well, introducing some of the people we know to Jesus, encouraging them to worship Him as Lord and trust Him as Savior, to call upon His name so that they might be saved.

So, even if we may not make as big a spiritual splash as Ezra did, what can we learn from him that can help us participate in the work of harvesting in God's field? What was it that made Ezra such a useful tool in the hand of God?

Well, all those names listed in the first five verses speak to his authority. You see, in those days, the tasks of preaching and teaching were specifically given to the priests and Levites, so because Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron the High Priest, Ezra had the highest authority to speak God's word to the people. And because of his lineage, he would be sure that the people of his time would listen to him.

Now of course, we don't have prophets who speak with Biblical authority anymore. And we don't need priests anymore to stand between us and God. No, at the end of our responsive reading, Peter told us that all Christians have been made priests. That means, in a very real sense, all Christians stand in Ezra's place. All Christians have a similar authority to speak God's Word.

But Peter wasn't the only Biblical writer who made this point. We've already seen that Jesus told His disciples to pray that God would send out laborers into His harvest field. And at the end of His earthly ministry, just before He ascended into Heaven, Jesus gave all of them, indeed all of us, one last Great Commission – to make disciples of all the nations by going to them, by baptizing them, and by teaching them the Word of God.

So, can we doubt that all of us Christians are called to engage in God's ministry of redemption – praying that God would send harvesters, and then doing all we can to make disciples of Jesus?

And no, this call isn't really optional. After all, Jesus said that His followers, for better or worse, would be like a city set on a hill. That means that in one way or another, our allegiance to Christ can't be hidden. So, the question for us is not whether we Christians will be noticed by the unbelievers around us – we will. No, the question is simply what people will see when they look at us. When people looked at Ezra, they believed him because of his genealogy. When people look at us, will they believe us because of the way we live?

Well, what else did people see when they looked at Ezra? Well it wasn't just his credentials, his genealogy. No, verse 6 tells us that he was also a ready scribe – this means that he was skilled in the Law of Moses.

Now, once again, Ezra made sure to give God all the glory for this knowledge, this skill. In verse six he reminds us that the Lord God of Israel was the One, after all, Who had given the Law to Moses in the first place. Ezra thus didn't make up the things he would tell to the people – no he made it clear that he would only say what God had already said.

And if we are all called to bear witness to Christ, that should comfort us as well. For the revival that is described in the last few chapters of this book did not, in fact, happen because of some fresh prophecy. No, a faithful preacher simply explained the Word that God had already given His people. Ezra simply helped the people see how God's Word applied to their everyday lives, and God did the rest.

So, sure we know we need a revival. We know we need more of God's Spirit in our lives, and in the lives of so many of our loved ones. So, isn't it good news that there's no magic formula in today's passage? There's no ritual we need to do to get God to bless us – that's the sort of thing pagans believe.

No, all we need to do is what Jesus told us: to pray that God would send out harvesters, and then to get busy about the work of making disciples – going to those who need more of Jesus in their lives, teaching them what His Word says, and bringing those to be baptized who are ready to make a public profession of faith and to follow Jesus.

So, how can we equip ourselves for this great task of evangelism? Well, it turns out that Ezra didn't just rely on his impressive genealogy. And he didn't just insist that people believe what he said because of how much he already knew about the Bible. No, verse 10 says that Ezra was determined, he set his heart to do three things, three things that all evangelists need to do as well.

In the first place, Ezra prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord. No matter how much he already knew about God's Word, he was determined to know it yet more thoroughly. Now, shouldn't that truth challenge all of us to devote ourselves to reading the Bible more consistently, and to study it more deeply? I mean Ezra was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, and he knew he had to study. Ezra could speak Hebrew for cryin' out loud, and even after years of reading the Bible, he knew he had more to learn. So if he saw the need to set his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, how much more time do we need to spend in this book? If we would help our friends and loved ones know Jesus or know Him better, don't we all need a firmer grasp on Who Jesus is, and what He has done, and what He has taught?

But there's something else Ezra realized he needed to do. For he didn't just prepare his heart to seek the law of the Lord – he also was determined to do the law of the Lord, to put it into practice, to apply it to his personal life. In other words, Ezra wasn't content just to talk the talk of the Christian life – he knew that unless he walked the walk, unless his own life was lived in conformity with the Biblical truths he sought to teach, he couldn't expect anyone even to listen to him, let alone to take him seriously. No, it was only after he had prepared his heart to seek God's Word and only after he had prepared his heart to do God's Word that he could get ready to do the third great task of evangelism, to teach God's Word, God's statutes and judgments to the people of Israel.

Well, what about us? We scoff at politicians who take private jets to conferences to rail against global warming. We condemn reporters who claim their main job is to oppose those in power, but then give a pass to the politicians who belong to their own party. We know there's nothing more offputting than hypocrisy.

So, of course we should pray for a revival in our increasingly idolatrous land. Of course we should pray that God would send out laborers into His harvest field. But while we pray for the lost, we must also recognize that Jesus has made all of us a kingdom of priests to proclaim His Word. He has made all of us a city on a hill, a holy nation for all the world to see. So, if we want more people to start living like Christians, if we want more people to give up all the idols we see around us, the pursuit of money and power, the pursuit of sex and drugs and all the rest of it, don't we all need to do a better job of living the Christian life? If we want people to listen to what the Bible says, if we want the people around us to change their screwed-up priorities, don't we need to bring our own lives more into line with what it teaches? Why should we expect anyone to listen to what we have to say about Jesus if we aren't listening to Him ourselves?

So, let's join Ezra, preparing our hearts to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do what it says. And as we love God with more and more of ourselves, and as we show more and more of that love to those

around us, let's do the best we can to encourage our friends and loved ones to follow Jesus as well. For as we seek God's face, and as we seek to do His Will, can we doubt that He will pour out more of His Spirit upon us, and upon those for whom we pray?