

The Beginnings of Revival Ezra 9

When chapter nine opens, some 4 months had passed since Ezra's group had arrived in Jerusalem. And given what we read here, Ezra had not been idle. After all, he was supposed to teach the Law of God to the people in Jerusalem, and appoint judges to hold them accountable to obey the Law. So given the confession of the leaders of God's people in verse 1, it's obvious that Ezra had gotten his point across. It's obvious they had become convinced they had broken God's law by marrying pagan women.

And one of the ways we know this is the archaic way in which they worded their confession. For they said that many people of the land, including many of the leaders themselves, had married into the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. Now, this list of nations simply wasn't accurate by 450 B.C. – only the Ammonites, Moabites and Egyptians were still around in Ezra's time. But because the rest of those nations had been on the do-not-marry list God had given their ancestors in Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7, the leaders of God's people were making their confession clear – they were, in other words, quoting the law they had broken.

But why did God give such a strange commandment? I mean, it sounds kinda racist to us, doesn't it? Well, if you take a look at verses 1 and 14, you'll notice that the abominations of the pagans are specifically mentioned. In other words, it wasn't just the racial makeup of these people that was the problem – it was the wicked, abominable things those pagans did, including the worship of other gods.

For you see, in the ancient world, to belong to a culture meant embracing the cult, the worship of its gods. So, when God told His people not to marry pagans, one of His main concerns was that such marriages would lead God's people into the worship of false gods. And in his prayer at the end of the chapter, Ezra confesses that this is in fact one of the main reasons that God's people had been sent into exile so many years ago.

But there is another reason why it was especially important for God's Old Testament people to maintain their particular ethnic identity, and we see a hint of that reason in verse 2 with the mention of the "holy seed." God's promises had been given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. And God had promised David that one of his descendants would be the Messiah Who would rule and reign over God's people forever. Now, we know that all those promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. But in order for it to be obvious to everyone that Jesus was in fact in the line of David and Abraham, the Old Testament people of God needed to marry other Jews, other recipients of the promises of God, at least until Jesus was born.

So, looking back from this side of the cross, we can understand why God gave that rather strange commandment. It was important for Jesus to be a Jew, and it was important for the Jews to preserve the purity of their worship. And we can also understand why, after the coming of Christ, all of God's racial restrictions on marriage have been removed.

But that doesn't mean this passage has nothing to tell us. After all, it's in the New Testament where Paul warns us Christians about being unequally yoked with unbelievers. That means that both

God's Old Testament and New Testament people were told not to marry outside the covenant community – it's just that the way that community is defined has changed.

And Jesus Himself had some very particular things to say about marriage in Matthew 19, doesn't He? Now in this passage He doesn't list of all the ways that people can get marriage wrong. No, instead of telling us all the things we shouldn't do, Jesus simply holds up God's standard for marriage – the union of one man and one woman for life, a standard that is rooted in creation itself. And it is because the Church continues to uphold that timeless standard, the standard that Jesus taught, that much of modern Western culture has turned away from the gospel. So far from being irrelevant to us, it turns out that people still have the same sorts of problems that they did in Ezra's time, marrying people they shouldn't.

But that leads us to an even bigger surprise in today's passage. We've already seen that God's Word makes it clear that God's people shouldn't marry outside the covenant community. But when Ezra made this clear to the leaders of God's people, they didn't do what so many of us would probably do. They didn't try to rationalize away their bad behavior. They didn't say they were too weak to obey God's Law, or plead that "The Devil made me do it." They didn't become angry or defensive, saying the Scriptures have no right to critique their actions. No, they admitted that they had sinned. In fact, the end of verse 2 makes it plain that the leaders of God's people had taken the lead in this type of sin as well. In short, the clear understanding of God's expectations led God's people to the conviction of their sin.

Now, for several weeks I've been mentioning that Ezra and the little group that returned with him from exile would be the agents of a great revival among God's people. And perhaps, because of that, you've been expecting to read about something spectacular like what happened on Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Perhaps you've been expecting to hear the sound of a mighty rushing wind, to see the fire of the Holy Spirit and to hear people speaking in tongues.

But when you think about it, all that happened to the apostles, not to the people who heard their preaching. No, what happened to the Jerusalem crowd on that first Pentecost Sunday was basically the same thing that happened to the leaders of God's people in Ezra's time: both groups heard the proclamation of God's Word. Both groups came to understand how they had broken God's Law. And both groups had the same reaction – instead of becoming angry or defensive, they were cut to the heart, and they admitted their guilt. This, in short, is the first part of what a real revival looks like – people coming under conviction of their sin.

But even that is not the most amazing thing we find in Ezra chapter 9. For look again at Ezra's prayer – doesn't it sound like he was somehow involved in this terrible sin? Now, we know that's not true – he wouldn't have been so shocked if he himself had married a pagan wife. So, why does Ezra keep talking about "our iniquities" and "our trespass" and how "we" have forsaken God's commandments? Shouldn't he be pointing fingers at the guilty parties, and say how wrong "they" are?

Well, perhaps this gives us another clue about what a real revival looks like. We've already seen that real revivals involve a deeper understanding of God's Word and the clear conviction that we have in fact broken God's law. Now, it seems that true revival also includes understanding the connection among God's people, the realization that we are all somehow involved in one another's sin.

Now, I know this doesn't make much sense to us American individualists. But we've already seen that marriage creates both a physical and spiritual bond between a man and a woman – that somehow in marriage two people can become one flesh. Well, the same sort of thing is true of the Church – we are all somehow connected, members, parts of the Body of Christ. That means we are one not only with Jesus our Head, but also with one another.

And that, in turn, means that if one of us is cut, somehow we all bleed. And that means if one of us sins, all of us somehow share in the guilt, and sometimes even in the consequences.

Look again at Ezra's prayer. We assume, and with good reason, that he was a man of sterling spiritual character. And yet he, along with all the rest of God's people, had been born in exile because of the sins of those who had gone before him. And he, along with all the rest of God's people, was living as a bondman, a slave, a subject of the pagan Persian Empire because of the sins of previous generations.

So, what does all this mean for us? It means Ezra wasn't the kind of preacher who held sinners at arm's length, screaming at them about how bad they were. No, his prayer shows us he was the kind of preacher who knew he was no better than anyone else, that he was just as much a sinner, just as much in need of God's mercy as anyone else. It was that kind of preaching that had led to a revival, to an awakening of God's people to their sin, to their need for forgiveness. Perhaps that's what our society needs as well – a proclamation of God's Word that is as humble as it is uncompromising, one that talks more about the problems of "us" rather than "you."

But once we know the truth of God's Word, and once we become aware of our individual sin as well as our involvement in the sin of the culture all around us, there's one more thing that true revival always brings – a deeper understanding of the character of the God we worship. For did you notice what Ezra keeps coming back to in his prayer? He acknowledges God's justice, and how all the people deserve the judgment they received. He confesses that God is righteous. But instead of asking for forgiveness, he just throws himself and all of God's people upon God's mercy. He trusts God to be merciful to sinners like all of them, like all of us.

And standing on this side of the cross, we can understand how all these things can be true about God at one time. Yes, Jesus was uncompromising in His teaching. Yes, Jesus upheld God's Law as something we all need to follow. And when Jesus died on the cross, we see the greatest example of God's perfect justice – for the punishment Jesus received is what all sin, all rebellion against God deserves. And yet in that same cross we also see the clearest example of God's mercy, because God took upon Himself that penalty. The righteous and merciful Son of God died so that sinners like us might live.

In fact, we even get a glimpse of the cross in Ezra's prayer, when we see Ezra identifying himself with his people's sin and yet praying to God on their behalf. For isn't that a little bit like what Jesus did? Paul says, "For our sake he (the Father) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21 ESV) The Son of God identified Himself so completely with us that He took our sins upon Himself. And at the same time, He imputed His own righteousness to all who would trust in Him. That's the essence of the gospel, and that's the good news that goes forth anytime there is a revival, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

So, yes, it's easy for us to pray for a revival, for God to pour out His Holy Spirit on all the folks outside the church so they would learn to behave better. But it seems that a real revival also involves God's people coming to a clearer understanding of our own sin. A real revival also involves God's people understanding how we are involved in the sins of others. And in a real revival, the focus isn't so much on having a new experience of God, but in coming to a deeper experience of the righteous, merciful God Who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Is that what we want? Do we know that's what we truly need?