

**Reformation Is Put to the Test:
Intermarriage with Unbelievers**

Ezra 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 6:17

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Rev. Greg L. Price

You can expect in your Christian life that reformation will be tested (and at times severely tested) by a worldly temptation, by the sin of others, by defection within Christ's Church, by some trial, by some affliction, by some accusation, soon after you have arrived at some point of reformation in your life, in your family, or in the Church. So often, it is after a high point of reformation in your life that you are blind-sided by some great test of your faith and trust in Jesus Christ (perhaps after a particular answer to prayer, or after a victory in your life or in the life of someone for whom you have been praying, or after a godly goal has been reached). When you can see a problem arising from the horizon and can somewhat track it as it grows nearer and nearer, you can be preparing yourself by way of praying and beseeching the Lord. But when you are basking in the warm sun of a victory (granted graciously to you by the Lord), and your day is suddenly overshadowed by a great trial that you had not expected, then the reformation just recently attained is put to the test. Will you run in panic and fear? Will you lash out against the Lord? Will you fall into depression and despair? Or will you be still and know that He is God and that He is your Deliverer? Dear ones, the Lord has a plan, and He will use even this great trial that has come into your life for your further reformation. Greater reformation comes from such unseen trials.

Dear ones, you're not alone, for Ezra faced a similar circumstance, in which the degree of reformation just attained after arriving in Jerusalem and in which Ezra was no doubt rejoicing was severely put to the test. Let us consider how reformation was put to the test from our text this Lord's Day in Ezra 9:1-4. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Sin That Tested Reformation (Ezra 9:1-2); and (2) The Sorrow That Preceded Further Reformation (Ezra 9:3-4).

I. The Sin That Tested Reformation (Ezra 9:1-2).

A. By way of a brief review, after Ezra and his reformers had safely arrived in Jerusalem, having been mercifully delivered on the road to reformation by the Lord from the ambushes set against them by enemies who sought to rob them of the precious treasures entrusted to them, they received some needed rest for three days. On the fourth day after arriving at Jerusalem, reformation did not cease. Whatever degree of reformation we may see (by God's amazing grace) in our lives, in our families, in Christ's Church, or in the nations of the world, there is always more reformation to attain. Reaching our Jerusalems of reformation in this life are not the end of reformation, it will not be finally ended until we reach the New Jerusalem, wherein dwells perfect and everlasting righteousness. For as we saw in Ezra 8, reformation continued by way of a faithful church government, by way of a covenanted unity, and by way of a civil government that lifted up the hearts of God's people in promoting reformation. Now it is soon after this reformation in Jerusalem had been gained by God's grace that Ezra was hit from behind with this great test to a covenanted reformation that is recorded for us in our text.

B. What was the nature of this great test by which Satan sought to hinder a covenanted reformation and by which the Lord granted His grace to Ezra and the people to advance in reformation? It was the violation of Israel's covenant with the Lord in the form of intermarriage with the ungodly people who lived within the land (Ezra 9:1-2).

1. Some of the Jewish princes who had not fallen into this sin of intermarrying with the

pagan people around them approached Ezra with this grievous matter as soon as Ezra was able to meet with them. But interestingly these godly princes do not begin in their description of the backsliding of God's people with the sin of intermarriage with unbelievers, but rather begin with the sin that prepared them for the sin of intermarriage with the ungodly. These godly princes informed Ezra that God's people "have not separated themselves from the people of the lands" (Ezra 9:1). The sin that prepared God's people to intermarry with unbelievers was first their intermingling with unbelievers by way of an intimate and familiar fellowship and friendship with them.

a. Now let us clarify this matter for just a moment. The idea of separating from unbelievers and idolaters in the land did not mean there could be no point of contact whatsoever. For they could buy and sell with unbelievers within the land (Deuteronomy 14:21; Nehemiah 13:15-22). They could testify of God's salvation to unbelievers (2 Kings 5:1ff; Isaiah 43:12; cp. Joseph, Jonah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah). Jesus was, in fact, known and was disparaged by the Pharisees for eating and drinking with sinners (lying, cheating tax collectors and prostitutes) in Matthew 9:10-13. And yet the Scripture states that Christ was "separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). How did Christ eat and drink with sinners and yet remain separate from sinners? Christ did not eat and drink with sinners in order to join with them in their sin, but rather to rescue them from their sin. Christ did not sit silently by, giving implicit approval to the covenant-breaking and law-breaking of sinners with whom He dined. He dined with sinners that they might become righteous in Him.

b. Dear ones, although the primary means of reaching sinners is through the preached Word of the Gospel by Christ's ministers, each of us has a role to be salt and light to a decaying and dark society all about us (Matthew 5:13-16). Thus, those relationships we have with nonchristians at work, in the neighborhood, in our families, at school, etc. should always be chiefly motivated by our earnest and continual prayer that we might be a means through whom they might come to trust alone in Jesus Christ as their justifying righteousness before God.

(1) If we enter friendly relationships with nonchristians simply for the fun of it, for the excitement of it, for the popularity of it, because we like them, or to fulfill some need in our own lives (like loneliness), we will almost certainly be entrapped and ensnared by their vices rather than they being brought to Christ by our virtues. How many times have Christians (whether young or old) fallen away from the Lord because they were lonely and simply wanted some fellowship or companionship with others (and in so doing ignored this moral principle of separation found here in Deuteronomy 22:9-11; Ezra 9:1; 2 Corinthians 6:17).

(2) On the one hand, we ought not to avoid all contact with unbelievers as if they had the plague. On the other hand, we must sincerely check our heart to see whether we are giving our affections to unbelievers and whether we resent being warned to guard ourselves from developing close, familiar relationships with unbelievers. If we are not careful, we will soon find ourselves enjoying their company more than we enjoy the company of God's people. The underlying problem is one in which we are drifting away from blessed fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ every day. When our relationship with Christ suffers the loss of a personal, familiar fellowship, we will go seeking to fill that emptiness with those who are not like Christ, but those who are unlike Christ. When our relationship with Jesus Christ is estranged (and more like a relationship with a stranger than with the Lover of our soul), we will be much more likely to seek the approval and love of those who are not our brethren in Christ. Dear ones, daily growing in our love for Christ through prayer, Scripture, and meditation upon the glory of Christ in saving sinners like us (who had nothing to offer Him but our sins), will give us a holy desire to see unbelievers brought to Christ, a godly wisdom to honestly discern whether our own heart is ever so gradually being drawn to unbelievers, and a burning passion to seek out Christian fellowship with those who trust in the same Gospel of Christ and who love the same Law of God and want to live it before others.

(3) And dear ones, let us not forget to include how much time we spend with and admiring TV stars, or music celebrities, our sports idols, or academic icons. We can form relationships and

attachments even with total strangers in giving our admiration, affection, and hearts to unbelieving strangers by means of intermingling emotionally with superstars).

(4) Even in our relationships with professing Christians who do not share a like precious faith, our continual prayer and goal should not be to remain divided from one another in different Christian Churches embracing contrary doctrines that prevent our covenanted unity and uniformity in the faith. To the contrary, our chief goal should be to see a blessed reformation wherein by God's grace, Christian brothers and sisters are being brought into a covenanted unity within the same faithful Church, professing the truth of Christ and exhibiting the love of Jesus Christ. The godly princes in Israel report to Ezra that the first step to the sin of intermarrying with unbelievers in the land was in establishing familiar and close relationships with unbelieving idolaters in the land wherein God's people gave their hearts and affections to the ungodly.

2. Because God's people did not heed the moral commandment of the Lord to separate themselves from the ungodly within the land, they were like a row of dominoes—the first domino fell when they intermingled in close and familiar relationships with the ungodly of the land, which then set in motion one domino after another as one family after another fell into the sin of intermarriage with the ungodly of the land (Ezra 9:2; Deuteronomy 7:3). This prohibition was a significant part of the covenant that God established with His people. The violation of this good commandment in God's Law not only hinders a biblical reformation (and in many cases destroys a biblical reformation) in the immediate family, but hinders or destroys a biblical reformation for generations to come.

a. I want to make it clear, that the prohibition of intermarriage was not a racial prohibition, an ethnic prohibition, or a national prohibition between a man and a woman. Clearly the prohibition was related to the "abominations" of these nations in turning the hearts of God's people away from the Lord to the idolatry of these nations (Ezra 9:1; Deuteronomy 7:4; 1 Kings 11:1-8).

b. This sin of God's people intermarrying with the ungodly is called an "abomination" (Ezra 9:1). The Hebrew noun for "abomination" is derived from the Hebrew verb, which means "to be abhorred". Thus, an abomination to God is that which God's abhors (including idolatry, offering of children as sacrifices, and sexual immorality).

c. Why is intermarrying with unbelievers an abomination in God's sight?

(1) Because marriage is a covenant made in the presence of the Lord, it makes of one covenantal flesh one who is in covenant with the Lord (the believer) and one who is not in covenant with the Lord (the unbeliever). Such a union cannot possibly reach the goal and blessing that God intended in marriage, where the hearts of a man and woman are knitted together in that which is more important than anything else in the world—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

(2) Furthermore, marriages between believers and unbelievers often lead believers away from the Lord and into a compromised faith and perhaps a false religion in order to have some peace within the home (Deuteronomy 7:4; 1 Kings 11:1-8).

(3) Moreover, that to which a Christian marriage is to point is to the covenant relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-27). That is why the Christian is only to marry in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39). But "in the Lord" should mean more than simply one who professes to be a Christian, if you want a marriage that will glorify the Lord. It should be a marriage in which love for Christ and serving Christ is supreme and evident; and a marriage in which there is a covenanted uniformity, agreeing to the same Terms of Communion.

(4) Finally, it not only brings conflict into the Divine institution of marriage (where there ought to be the greatest degree of love, peace, unity in the truth of Scripture, and working together for reformation), but also brings conflict into the minds of the children who are the fruit of such a union (who face the confusion of hearing what the believing parent says and what the unbelieving parent says, who often do not agree).

d. What is the believer to do who is married to an unbeliever? The believer is commanded by the Lord (in 1 Corinthians 7:12-13) to remain married with the unbeliever and not to seek to be divorced from the unbeliever (whether the believer sinfully married the unbeliever or whether one of the spouses became a believer after the marriage). The believer is to live the Gospel in such a powerful way within the home and to pray incessantly for the unbelieving spouse, so that the unbeliever might be saved through the life (if not the words) of the believer (1 Corinthians 7:16; 1 Peter 3:1-2).

(1) Because God calls it an abomination for a believer to marry an unbeliever, is this an unpardonable sin? Absolutely not! The grace of God is immeasurable in forgiving us all our sins according to Colossians 2:13 (not some of our sins), even forgiving our abominations (which are many, cp. Proverbs 6:16-19). Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound (Romans 5:20).

(2) By way of encouragement, always remember that Timothy (Paul's spiritual son in the faith) came from such a home in which his mother was a believer and his father was an unbeliever (Acts 16:3). And Timothy was used greatly by the Lord for the glory of the Lord.

4. I would also have you carefully note who were the chief or first in committing this abomination. It wasn't the people at large, but was rather the civil rulers and princes (Ezra 9:2), and then the priests and the Levites, and then the people at large. That is usually how apostasy infects the church—usually from the top down, not from the bottom up. The aggravation of this sin is greatly increased when those who were bound before God to lead, nourish, and protect the flock, were the very ones who led the sheep astray. However, the sheep do not escape responsibility for sinfully following their leaders, for they so often love to have it so (Jeremiah 5:31; 2 Timothy 4:3-4).

II. The Sorrow That Preceded Further Reformation (Ezra 9:3-4).

A. Here we see exemplified outwardly by way of the rending of garments and the pulling out of hair the inward grief and sorrow that brought Ezra to an astonished silence. He did not even know what to say at the moment, he was so blind-sided by the covenant-breaking of God's people (and chiefly the leaders). Although these outward signs were cultural in nature, what they represented inwardly are moral in nature, namely a deep sense of grief and sorrow over the sins of all around us, but especially the backsliding and covenant-breaking of God's people.

1. This grief and sorrow is chiefly due to the blemishing of God's honor and God's grace. Dear ones, if our grief and sorrow of our own covenant-breaking and violation of God's commandments is not primarily directed at how we have dishonored and brought shame upon the Lord, we have not grieved and sorrowed as we ought. Ezra's grief was not first directed to the people, but to the Lord. How could God's people treat the God of righteousness, holiness, love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness in such a contemptible way? Dear ones, this is the beginning of true repentance—the grief we have over our offense against our Savior and God. Even if no one else sees and knows our sin, we have given the devil a footstool to grandstand before the Lord and have grieved the holy angels who attend us.

2. Ezra's grief and sorrow is subordinately due to the consequences that God may send by way of His chastening hand. So often our first thoughts are, what will this sin cost me? That is important, but it is subordinate to the shame we have brought upon Christ.

3. Not only was Ezra grieved, but a faithful remnant was likewise grieved (Ezra 9:4).

B. Conclusion

1. Dear ones, Ezra's heart was broken before the Lord over the covenant-breaking of God's people, rather than filled with pride and biting criticism at the covenant-breaking of God's people. Beloved, the sins of others and the backsliding within Christ's Church should always humble us before the Lord, rather than exalting us before the Lord. Yes, we must address such public sins, but do others see in us and hear from

us a vindication of our own honor or a vindication of God's honor? Do others see in us and hear from us a despising of God's people, or a care for God's people? Do others see in us and hear from us ridiculing, or sorrowing?

2. Let us not forget and let us meditate upon the response of Ezra (Ezra 9:3) and the response of the godly (Ezra 9:4). They are humbled. Consider the words of the man after God's own heart (Psalm 35:11-14). Dear ones, there will not follow a biblical reformation (as we shall see occurred in Israel under Ezra) if there is not evident such a humiliation over our own sin and the sin of God's people. Only once we have such a grief because God's honor has been blemished by us or by others, will we be ready to promote a biblical reformation that is based upon the Covenant of Grace (rather than upon the Covenant of Works). For a heart that is broken with sorrow over sin because it is an offense against the righteousness of a holy God and against the love of a merciful God will be a heart that turns to Christ for forgiveness and will be comforted (Matthew 5:4). Such a heart will be ready to go to others and to advance reformation.

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