

Jerusalem Finally Reached: Reformation Continues In Stages

Ezra 8:33-36

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The need for biblical reformation will not cease in this world until the bodily Second Coming of Christ, at which time the curse is entirely removed and the Lord establishes a New Heaven and New Earth wherein righteousness perfectly reigns. As we travel on the road to biblical reformation, we will encounter the ambushes of the enemy in seeking to rob us of the biblical attainments (which have been entrusted to us to preserve and to protect), nevertheless, as we refuse to move the biblical boundaries and landmarks of our spiritual forefathers and as we continue this journey in humble dependence upon the grace of Christ, we and our posterity will finally reach Jerusalem (a covenanted reformation of family, church, and state in the millennium, if not in our generation, then in the generations of our posterity that follow us). But this I believe, the Holy Spirit would have us to understand today, that our hope to be fully reformed and sanctified will not even be realized in the glorious millennium of reformation in church and state; for even when the knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, there will be a need for biblical reformation (sin and error will not be fully eradicated from the millennium, though greatly subdued). Just as Ezra and his band of reformers no doubt looked with longing and earnest eyes for that earthly Jerusalem as they traveled that long, dangerous road to reformation, the arrival in Jerusalem did not bring an end to the work of reformation. Therefore, our hope for perfect reformation, sanctification, and conformity to the image of Christ will not be fully realized until we reach that glorious New Jerusalem, that heavenly Jerusalem.

From our text (in Ezra 8:33-36), let us consider three ways in which a biblical reformation continued for Ezra and these reformers even after they had completed their dangerous journey on the road to reformation and had finally arrived in Jerusalem: (1) Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, Church Government Held Them Accountable (Ezra 8:33-34); (2) Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, A Covenanted Unity Brought Them Together (Ezra 8:35); and (3) Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, Civil Government Lifted Up The People of God and the True Religion (Ezra 8:36).

I. Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, Church Government Held Them Accountable (Ezra 8:33-34).

A. Moving from how God delivered Ezra and the reformers who joined him on the road to reformation from the ambushes that were set against them by their enemies (Ezra 8:31), Ezra and his fellow reformers safely arrive by God's grace and power in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:32). Once in Jerusalem, they are no doubt tired, weary, and exhausted from their long, dangerous, and stressful journey, and are allowed to rest for three days (Ezra 8:32), but on the fourth day, the work of reformation continues even after arriving in that long hoped-for city of Jerusalem. The first noted work of reformation is one of accountability in the stewardship that was entrusted to the Priests and the Levites in preserving and protecting the gold, silver, and precious vessels that were entrusted to them as they had left Babylon (the city of captivity) and had finally arrived in Jerusalem (the city of reformation).

B. We had focused on this stewardship that was entrusted to the 12 Priests and 12 Levites in a previous sermon (Ezra 8:24-30). Now let us consider the church government that God ordained to whom these

Priests and Levites were to give an account now that they have arrived in Jerusalem.

1. First, the gold, silver, and precious vessels were weighed in the Temple by 2 Priests (Meremoth and Eleazar) and by 2 Levites (Jozabad and Noadiah) according to Ezra 8:33. Thus, we see that officers of the Church in Jerusalem were designated to count and to weigh the treasures brought from Babylon to Jerusalem by the 12 Priests and 12 Levites. I submit to you that this is indeed one important work of church government, i.e. to govern the Church with an eye to seeing that its members do not lose and waste what they are given by the Lord (in the gifts and graces of the Lord, in the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and in the purity of doctrine and worship), but rather taking inventory of inward graces and outward gifts, and examining the profession and practice of biblical truth as Christ's Ministers, Elders, and Deacons.

2. Second, we see from our text that there was a very precise accounting of the gold, silver, and precious vessels. It was not a haphazard accounting or a cursory and superficial accounting, for we note in Ezra 8:34 the following: "By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time." In other words, there was a due care and exactness in examining what had been entrusted when they left Babylon, and what was preserved on the road to reformation until they reached Jerusalem. Note that our text states, "and all the weight was written at that time." Thus, we not only see that there was a church government that was instituted by the Lord to hold those accountable to whom had been entrusted God's gifts, but also that the examination of those gifts was counted and weighed out—it was a precise accounting.

3. Dear ones, God works a biblical reformation not by free and independent spirits, not by those who are lone rangers who are not accountable to anyone but themselves, but God works a biblical reformation by accountable and submissive spirits, who willingly submit

themselves to Christ and to those to whom Christ grants a lawful authority in the home, church, and state. God's people are not anarchists, and are not anti-government. God's people love lawful government under God's rule, because lawful government is God's good government over His people and is a means of grace in promoting reformation, growth, and accountability in the family, in the church, and in the state.

a. And though there may not be faithful Church Sessions, Presbyteries, and Synods in every location, you are yet to be accountable to those lawful Church Officers that Christ has appointed within His Church—for your own well-being. For it is not to the well-being of any of us to walk and talk, to theologize and philosophize as if we were a kingdom of one, an island, entirely to ourselves. God did not so intend that we be Independents (only accountable to ourselves), but rather that we be Presbyterians (accountable to one another in the family and in the Church of Christ, and accountable to those who have lawful authority under Christ).

b. Moreover, when those who have lawful authority over us, love us enough to inspect our gifts and graces (that have been entrusted to us by the Lord), our treasures and talents, our growth and reformation (or lack thereof), we should not rise up with consternation and indignation, saying, "Who do you think you are to inquire about my life? It is mine and none of your concern." Such is not a righteous indignation, but an unrighteous indignation. Our response to such loving accountability and caring inspection of the fruit in our lives will reveal our submission and accountability to Christ, who commissions those to whom He gives a lawful authority in the home, church, and state to love and to care for His people (Hebrews 13:17—what is here true in the Church of Christ is true in the family and in the state). If that authority is lawful under Christ (and not a usurpation of God's authority), and if the

examination is according to just weights and measures found in God's Word, then we should learn to joyfully submit, and should tremble to rebel. Such accounting, however, should be exercised out of love for the sheep (and the sheep should be able to see that love).

II. Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, A Covenanted Unity Brought Them Together (Ezra 8:35).

A. From our text, we see another work of biblical reformation that continued even after Ezra and the reformers with him had arrived in Jerusalem. All those who had been led captive to Babylon (or had been born captive in Babylon) assembled themselves together in Jerusalem as a representative group in offering sacrifices, not only for the relatively small number of people that were in Jerusalem, but for "all Israel" (Ezra 8:35).

1. God had covenanted with the 12 tribes of Israel to be their God at Mt. Sinai, and all 12 tribes had covenanted together to be God's people at Mt. Sinai. Israel was a covenanted nation before the Lord—as to both church and state, they had a lawful constitution, laying out their duties as individuals, as families, as a church, and as a state under God. But then under Jeroboam I, the 10 tribes of Israel sinfully departed from and rent that covenanted unity and uniformity within church and state, while the 2 tribes of Judah retained the lawful constitution of the Lord (even though grievously violating that lawful constitution of God's Law throughout its history). As a result, what previously had been 1 church and 1 kingdom, became 2 churches and 2 kingdoms. Both Israel and Judah were severely judged by the Lord and led into captivity for their covenant-breaking, both were now dispersed throughout the far-reaching boundaries of the Persian Empire.

2. But as Ezra and his reformers arrive in Jerusalem, they call all of their brethren together in Jerusalem to seek God's forgiveness for their sins (sin offering) and to offer themselves to the Lord as living sacrifices (whole burnt offering), not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of all 12 tribes of Israel—the whole Visible Church of God united together again in a covenanted unity and uniformity. As they assembled, they did not view themselves as being different denominations, holding contrary doctrines, practicing contrary worship, or submitting to contrary church government and church courts one from the other, but rather this was an example of a covenanted unity and uniformity in one doctrine, in one worship, and in one church government. These brethren of ours in the Old Testament Church were not merely claiming a spiritual unity with one another, but were evidencing a visible unity with one another (just as Christ prayed that His Church would be one visibly in John 17:21). These brethren of ours in the Old Testament Church did not yet see realized that full and complete unity of all the 12 tribes of God's people, who were scattered throughout the Persian Empire, but by faith in the promises of God (Jeremiah 50:4-8), and in certain hope that God would bring those promises to pass, these brethren of ours offered sacrifices for their sins and offered sacrifices in dedicating themselves to the Lord to pursue that covenanted unity and uniformity that was firmly stated in their constitution, which God gave to them at Mt. Sinai.

B. Dear ones, we who are Covenanters understand very clearly that we are bound by the Scriptural principles of a covenanted reformation and bound by the Solemn League and Covenant to pray and to endeavor to extirpate (uproot) within our various spheres and callings (as we are able to do) heresy, corrupt worship, blasphemy, idolatry, false religion, profanity, covenant-breaking, Sabbath-breaking and all that is contrary to Scripture. This is indeed the work of a biblical and covenanted

reformation. But sadly what may not be talked about among us as much is that a covenanted unity is not in mere externals (doctrine, worship, and government), but is necessarily in internals as well. Dear ones, a biblical reformation will be evidenced by a covenanted unity in manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26). Without these graces and the fruit of the Spirit, we will only be pursuing the outward shell of covenanted unity and uniformity. We will have the skeleton and perhaps the flesh of a covenanted reformation, but we will not have the heart of a covenanted and biblical reformation. We may be able to say that we are one in doctrine, worship, and church government, but are we one in our sincere love for one another. We may pray for doctrinal oneness, but do we pray for oneness in love within our families and within Christ's Church? The work of a covenanted unity love and truth is the work of a biblical reformation.

III. Even After Arriving In Jerusalem, Civil Government Lifted Up The People of God and the True Religion (Ezra 8:36).

A. We note that from our text there was a third step of biblical reformation taken after Ezra and his reformers had safely arrived in Jerusalem: they delivered the orders of King Artaxerxes to the Gentile governors in the land of Israel (royal orders that concerned exerting their power and using their influence to advance a biblical reformation in Israel). Our text states in Ezra 8:36 that "they [i.e. the royal governors—GLP] furthered the people, and the house of God." The Hebrew word that is translated "furthered" quite literally means, "lifted up" (i.e. these Gentile governors lifted up the people of God by way of help and encouragement, and lifted up the house of God by way of the laws that protected and defended the one true religion of God. There is no indication that these Gentile rulers overstepped any boundaries in

supporting and defending the one true Church of God in the Old Testament. If Gentile rulers were moved by the Lord (as is specifically stated in Ezra 1:1) to assist, help, support, defend, and preserve the one true Church of God, the one true doctrine of God, the one true worship of God, and the one true church government of God, why do many within the Visible Church at large now deem it a grievous violation of a magistrate's duty to do what these Gentile rulers did? For even the Apostle Paul declares that the civil magistrate is ordained by God to be God's minister to His people for good (Romans 13:4)?

B. We have noted in previous sermons in the Book of Ezra how God raised up Gentile Kings to promote reformation in Israel and within God's Church in Jerusalem: namely, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes (with God's approbation and approval). Because God commands the kings and judges of Gentile nations, not merely Israel (in Psalm 2:10-11) to serve Christ (who is God's anointed King of kings over all the families and nations of the earth), to serve Christ in their official capacity as civil magistrates and to kiss Christ by way of honor and devotion in their official capacity as civil magistrates, judgment will fall upon those nations (Israel and Gentile nations alike) which will not serve and kiss Christ. Dear ones, a biblical reformation is not only a reformation in church, but also a reformation in state.

C. Dear ones, as this sermon draws to an end, remember that biblical reformation is not a sprint, but is rather a marathon. It requires patience, endurance, and perseverance in the love of Christ and in the truth of Christ (even after we arrive at our Jerusalem or even during the millennium). Sadly, there are those who may be attracted to the biblical principles of a covenanted reformation, but when reformation does not happen as quickly as they hoped or when reformation begins to require

more sacrifice of them than they ever expected (in their own lives, families, and Christ's Church), they burn out and fall to the ground like a falling star. Beloved, even when we reach our hoped-for Jerusalems in this life (those high points in our lives that we have thought would bring us to such places of reformation), we all too soon realize that we are not finished with reformation. We may have envisioned as we struggled along that dusty, narrow, dangerous road to reformation (encountering the ambushes of enemies, but being delivered by the grace of God from the ambushes of the enemy), that once we finally reached a certain Jerusalem in our life (a degree of reformation) that we would be able to rest and simply enjoy the reformation that had been attained.

D. Perhaps you have thought to yourself that if you can only reach that Jerusalem in your personal life where you have overcome that besetting sin, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where you have the job, house, financial security that would allow you time to spend doing more spiritual activities, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where you are finally married and have a family you will not struggle with the sexual temptations that hound you at the present time, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where your spouse becomes a Christian, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where you are free of a bodily affliction, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where Christ's Church is united in a covenanted uniformity, or if you can reach that Jerusalem where the nations of this world covenant themselves to be Christian nations under Christ, and the list of "ifs" goes on and on as to Jerusalems in this life in which we may place our hope in finally bringing us to the state where we simply enjoy God's rest, God's peace, and God's reformation. Beloved, we should never think, speak, or act as if such a Jerusalem exists upon earth that it will solve all our problems, make us perfectly happy, and bring to an end the need for biblical reformation—the only Jerusalem that will bring the

need for biblical reformation to an end here upon the earth is that New Jerusalem (in Revelation 21:1-2).

E. This truth is not intended to dampen our hearts in working toward and praying for certain godly goals and degrees of reformation in our own personal lives, in our families, in Christ's Church, or in the nations of this world, this we should do every single day. We should have our Jerusalems in this life (godly goals toward which we journey on the road to reformation). However, if we are not careful, we can so live for and so hope in our earthly Jerusalems that all we see is that earthly Jerusalem toward which we journey, and forget that there is a New Jerusalem coming wherein dwells perfect righteousness. Our earthly Jerusalems should simply be means to our full enjoyment of Christ in that heavenly Jerusalem. The Jerusalem that Ezra and the small band of reformers hoped-for and finally reached (after their long dangerous journey on the road to reformation) was not the end of reformation, but rather was a further means to reformation in being conformed to Christ. Dear ones, the first return to and reformation in Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Joshua did not complete reformation (neither did the First Reformation in Europe). The second return to and reformation in Jerusalem under Ezra did not complete reformation (neither did the Second Reformation in England, Ireland, and Scotland). The third return to and reformation in Jerusalem under Nehemiah did not complete reformation (neither will the Third Reformation in the millennium). Let us is then no place our ultimate hope in the Jerusalems of this present life and world (for we will sorely disappointed when problems arise and need for further reformation is manifest), but let our ultimate hope be in that heavenly Jerusalem of which we read in Hebrews 12:22-25. Keep one eye of faith and the other eye of hope upon Christ and the New Jerusalem

above, where there is finally rest from all our labors and no need for reformation ever again in the glorious presence of our Savior.

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