

Marks of Spiritual Awakening

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra 9. We're going to continue our exposition of this important 9th chapter and our larger study of Ezra and Nehemiah which we believe are really two parts of one book, written, composed by someone who had access to the diaries of Ezra and Nehemiah and put together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we have a perfect word from God in these two books, Ezra and Nehemiah. And this morning what we're gonna look at is account, well, actually what Ezra 7 to 10 does for us is give us an account of one of the great movements of God in history, a great spiritual awakening happens through the ministry and leadership of Ezra, the priest and scribe of Israel. This is one of the great awakenings that happens in the Bible. In fact, what we're gonna look at is we're going to see the title of the message this morning is "Marks of Spiritual Awakening." Marks of spiritual awakening. We'll see that there are three marks that we're gonna look at this morning in this passage that demonstrate that if someone has been awakened to the things of God, that God's hand is at work in your life.

This spiritual awakening happened in 458 BC, the 7th to 10th chapters of Ezra basically cover a one year period. Ezra 7:9 we're told that Ezra began the process of traveling back from Babylon to Jerusalem, began the process of raising a group of people to go back, a second wave of returnees from the exile. The first wave had happened in 538 BC, 80 years before Ezra is moved by God to bring a second wave back, and the 7th to 10th chapter of Ezra deal with that second return under Ezra himself and it takes exactly one year is what we're told about in the passage. If you read and you look for the time markers, Ezra begins the return the first day of the first month of the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, and he gets them back and then the end of chapter 10, chapter 10, verse 17 tells you that these events conclude on the first day of the first month of the next year. So it takes one year. It takes 4 ½ months for them to get back to the land, chapter 7 and 8 take that part, and then chapter 9 we pick up after they're back in the land, after Ezra's been there for about a month, actually I'm sorry, another four months. It's now the ninth month of that year. It started the first month, got back on the fifth month, now we're in the ninth month. And so he's been there ministering the word for some time and now we begin to see marks of spiritual awakening, revival. In fact, a word that you're gonna hear in the passage is "reviving," and in the Hebrew it means "the renewal of life; the giving of life."

We saw before in chapter 7 and 8 that Ezra was a man that had the hand of God upon him. Three times in chapter 7, one of the key phrases, "The hand of the Lord was upon him." Three times it speaks of that about Ezra, and because the hand of the Lord was upon him, in chapter 8 the hand of the Lord is upon the group of people he's gathering to take back. The hand of the Lord upon Ezra in chapter 7 three times. The hand of the Lord upon the people he's taking back with him three times in chapter 8. And now in chapter 9 what happens is though the phrase is not used, we can see that the hand of God that moved Ezra and these people is now at work among the Jews who had formerly returned. The hand of God came to work in the people of Israel who were already in Jerusalem when these folks came back.

So what does it look like when the hand of God begins to move among his people? What are the marks of true spiritual awakening? True spiritual vibrancy and life? Let's read the text of Scripture, Ezra 9:1-15.

1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." 3 When I heard about this matter [this is Ezra in first person writing], I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering. 5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God; 6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day. 8 But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. 9 For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. 10 Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments,

11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. 12 So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.' 13 After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, 14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? 15 O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we ask that the entrance of Your word might give light and that in Your light we might see light, that You might search our hearts, grant us true knowledge of ourselves as we come to have true knowledge of You, and may we flee to Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

So the marks of spiritual awakening. The marks of true spiritual vitality. You want to see God's hand at work in your life, you're discouraged, you are in need of the Lord touching you. What do you really need? What you need is what Ezra is embodying for us in this experience that we see in the life of Ezra and the people of Judah.

So the question I want you to think about, then, is what does it look like when God is actively at work in your life for your good and his glory? What does it look like when he's granting more either a spiritual awakening to you out of a time of spiritual dullness and lethargy, or out of when you are unconverted and in your sins and you don't even know it, what does God have to do? He wakens your soul and then after you become a believer, we can go into times of relative spiritual dullness where we need to hear the words, "Awake, O sleeper," as Paul says in his epistle, and so what does it look like when he awakens you? What does it look like when God is actively at work in your life? What are the marks of a true spiritual awakening, marks of genuine spiritual activity by the Holy Spirit? What does it look like?

I want to suggest there are three things I think that we can see in the text that will help us understand what it is like when God really is at work in our lives and what we should long for from him. The first is if God is at work in your life, you will be afraid of what you should be afraid of. We are often afraid of many things, we're afraid of death, we're afraid of illness, we're afraid of accidents, things happening to those we love, we're afraid of disease, we're afraid of financial downturn. We're afraid of lots of things and there's a

reasonableness about having some genuine concern about those things and a sense of, you know, wisdom about how we approach those things, but if we're seeing things correctly, we will be afraid of what we should be afraid of and this is what we're often not afraid of nearly enough, in fact, it's what we're continually not afraid of nearly enough, and that is, we should be afraid of, as we're going to see here a key word in the passage is the word "tremble." It's used in the chapter 9 that we just read and also we'll be seeing it again in chapter 10. Chapter 9, verse 4, "Then everyone who trembled." That's there again in chapter 10, verse 3, "Those who tremble." What do they tremble at? What is it that we should be afraid of? Well, the cause of their trembling is they've heard the words of the God of Israel. Verse 4, "Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel." Chapter 10, verse 3, "to put away all the wives and their children according to the counsel of my Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God."

So they trembled at the words of the God of Israel and you read on in that passage, they "trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles." The word of God exposed the unfaithfulness of the people and they trembled before God and, in one sense, what you should be afraid of is what the word of God says about you apart from Christ, and you could almost say if God is at work in your life, it's not only that you will be afraid of what you should be afraid of, you will be afraid of whom you should be afraid of. The greatest and truest reason to be afraid is to be afraid of the living God who holds our life breath in our hand and who knows everything about us, and his word lays bare our souls in such a way that we suddenly begin to see what he sees already. He sees it before we see it. He knows it. He doesn't need his word to come into our hearts to see the ungodliness and wickedness in my heart. He already knows it, but when he brings his word to bear, then suddenly and God is working and he's awakening me spiritually, then I see it and I am afraid.

The fear of the Lord is an important concept in the Scriptures. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is an Old Testament, it's in Old and New Testament, we see it in both places but it's something that we see as we walk through the Old Testament that those who really loved God feared him. They stood in awe of him. They saw him in his majesty and his holiness and his righteousness and they ordered their lives accordingly. And so what's happening is God begins to move among his people. He sends Ezra back, a scribe skilled in the Scriptures we're told in chapter 7, verse 6. When he arrives, he begins to preach the word because we're told he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, chapter 7, verse 10, he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. And so what he does is he begins to preach the word, and as he preaches the word, we're seeing the effect of maybe a sermon series that this guy's preached and the people now are convicted and they come confessing their sin, and they even in the confession show that they've been listening to the word because they speak about that we have not separated ourselves, which is one of the clear teachings of the Pentateuch, particularly Deuteronomy; that when they go into the land, they're to separate themselves from the peoples of the land and from their abominable practices. They're to remain distinct and separate. God calls them to be a holy people and he calls you, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, to be a holy person before him, set apart. You're not to be like the peoples of the lands. You're not to go after the

same things they go after or worship the gods that they worship. You are to worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve. And so Ezra's been preaching this message and these people who were not thinking they needed to repent suddenly now are made aware they need to repent. They are trembling at the words of the God of Israel. As they see the unfaithfulness of the exiles and they know that God is holy and he judges wickedness and in the hearts of his people he disciplines it, so the word has exposed their sin and what the word does is it exposes your sin, it exposes you. It exposes my sin. It exposes me.

Turn with me to Hebrews 4. Hebrews 4:12-13. Listen to this description of what the word of God does in the hearts of his people, in the hearts of those who hear his word. "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The word of God as it is proclaimed, as it is understood, when the Spirit is attending it in your life, what it does is it cuts through all of the surface and it cuts down to the very depth of your being and it exposes the thoughts and intentions of the heart in the same way that a scalpel would cut into even the bone, to the marrow, dividing joint and marrow. The word does that in the soul.

So that, look what it says verse 13, this is the result, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." So the word of God cuts and lays us open and we see ourselves as God has already seen us and we know this is what he sees in me, and that rightly understood should inspire fear.

I want to say something, you know, you think about this, this is an important concept and what we're gonna see is what this inspires fear to make you run to Christ. That's the good news but you have to hear the bad news first. And I was thinking about this just this week and so often when we talk to unbelievers and skeptics, you know, have conversations with friends or folks that you want to hear the things of God, you want them to come to know Christ, and too often we come at it from a standpoint, and there's a place for this but it's not as big a place as we make it. We came at it from a standpoint of asking this skeptic, "What do you think about God? Let me help you with your thoughts about God. What do you think about God?" We think that's the question. The question that we need to put before the person is, "What does God think about you?" And it's the word of God spoken that presses that reality home. The issue is not what you think about God and is this reasonable, the issue is what does God think about you as he looks at your life against his standard, and that's really the key evangelistically because only when a person sees who they are before God will they flee to Christ. So though we may start with some of that, you know, general conversational kindness, you don't just start off with, "What does God think about you?" You know, you have a discussion but lovingly, kindly, if you love this person, you want them to see that what really matters, though, is what he sees about me and what he sees about you, and what he sees in me is complete poverty spiritually, and what he sees in you is exactly the same thing.

So the word of God lays us bare. It leaves us, when it has done its work rightly, it leaves us with a sense that we now see what God sees because no creature is hidden from his sight ever, and everything in our hearts is open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do, with whom we're going to have to stand, whom we're going to have to stand before and the word of God wonderfully, powerfully gets below all of the lies that we are believing in ourselves, all of the foolishness that we think and it shows us who we are before God. Jesus pictured in Revelation 1, the glorious ascended Christ. John sees the marks of his wounds but he sees a man of such holiness, that his hair is white, there is brightness and brilliance, he's shining, and his eyes are flames of fire. He sees everything in me. He sees everything in you. And then John having seen this vision of the risen Christ, the friend that he knew himself, many times leaned against him and Jesus had his arm around him as his dear friend, John now seeing Christ in his glory falls at his feet as a dead man until Jesus lifts him up. Then what he hears from Jesus is Jesus then, the first thing he tells him is, "You take this message to the seven churches," and you know, there's some key phrases repeated in those seven letters to the seven churches, seven churches where people loved God and early in the first century were living for God in hostile difficult times and yet Jesus shows that he sees everything. The flames of fire sees into their hearts and he says seven times, "I know. I know your deeds." Five times he says that, to five of the churches, "I know your deeds." He says to another church, "I know where you live." And then after saying, "I know," and describing what he knows, he says, "Repent," and the word of God has that same function to bring a person into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ who knows them and knows everything about them and he calls for repentance but he also calls for faith.

That passage we're in, Ephesians 4, it goes so well with the song we sang at the beginning of the service, "there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." Look where Paul, look where... I'm sorry, I don't think Paul wrote this but anyway the author of Hebrews, some people do think Paul wrote it. We don't know for sure. The author is not listed. Anyway I happen to say Paul a lot of times. I give Paul credit for all kinds of stuff. I was reading in Genesis the other day and talking and somebody said, as Paul, I mean as Moses says. Anyway, he did write over half the New Testament so it makes it easy to do that.

But anyway where does the author of Hebrews go to? He says, "Look, the word of God lays bare your heart and you now see yourself as God sees you." What does he do next? Look at what he does, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Our confession that he is able to save me. He's able to save to the uttermost the one whose hope is in him. Hold fast your belief in him as not only the one who sees everything about you but who is your surety before God, who stands before God clothed in righteousness, interceding for those who have repented and placed their faith in him. Then he goes on to say, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." He understands what we're going through. He understands the challenges. And look what he says next, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence." Our heart has been laid bare before the holy Judge of the universe, but to the believer who has placed

his faith in Christ, the judgment throne becomes the family room. "Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Run into your Father's arms, he says. You've been exposed before a holy God, what do you do now? Run into your Father's arms through Christ.

So the evidence of the work of God in someone's life in awakening them is that they are afraid of what they should be afraid of. They're afraid of God's holy indignation against my sin and the word of God exposes that and makes us run to Christ. That's why God has given his law so you will be afraid of what you should be afraid of, what God's word says about you. That's what you should be afraid of. That is a mark of spiritual awakening, a mark of someone who truly is being acted upon by the Spirit of God, not just merely a religious experience. There are many emotional experiences that people have that they mistake for conversion, but the mark of real spiritual awakening is you'll be afraid of what you should be afraid of, or you will be afraid of whom you should be afraid of. The fear of the Lord is awakened in the heart as it is here.

Secondly, the second mark of spiritual awakening is you will be appalled at what you should be appalled at. Another key word in the passage in Ezra 9 is the word "appalled." It occurs twice, verse 3 and 4 when Ezra says, "When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering." This word means "to be astonished; to be stunned; to be stupefied." It means to be stunned into silence. It pictures a person who's in horror at what he sees and is devastated by it and actually one of the ways this word is used in the concrete way is that this word could be used to describe the devastation that happens physically through some natural disaster. An earthquake and you see the buildings that were standing there strong destroyed. A tornado and you're stupefied. And so Ezra was appalled, stunned into silence by the sinfulness of the people. What are you to be appalled at? Be appalled at what you ought to be appalled at. What you should be appalled at is your and my sinfulness.

We saw last time that the issue is they had not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands. No separation. And he mentions in verse 1 all of those people groups, those eight different peoples: Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and the Amorites. Five of those are peoples in Canaan. The Moabites and the Ammonites are people just outside of Canaan, the other side of the Jordan. And Egypt, of course, where they had been formerly before the exodus. I mentioned last time it's not about racial identity. He's not saying you need to separate from them because there is some kind of racism going on. No, not at all. It's not about racial identity, it's about spiritual commitment. Now how do you know that? Well, I told you that we looked at how four of these particular peoples are in the line of Christ; that they are actually people that were intermarried into Israel and in the line of the Messiah. So the issue is not that you just intermarry with them, the issue is that you intermarry, as he says here, according to their abominations. You intermarry and adopt their way of life. Their gods become your gods.

In fact, I don't think I shared this with you. I want to show this to you. "Separate yourself" is the key word about what they needed to do and what they had not done, it's in verse 1, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations." And we saw that in chapter 10, verse 11, he's going to tell them now the way of repentance is going to mean that you need to make confession to the Lord God of your fathers and do his will, chapter 10, verse 11, and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. What's interesting, though, is the same verb "separate" which we've actually run into it before in Ezra 6:21, and look back at this. This shows you it's not about racial identity, it's about spiritual commitment because in chapter 6, verse 21, this is back to the first return under Zerubbabel when they rebuilt the temple. This records what happened in 516 BC, 60 years before where we are now in our passage. Verse 21 of chapter 6, "The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover." That is, anyone in the land of any people group or whatever who wanted to separate themselves from the ungodliness of the land to Israel, to follow the God of the Bible, was welcome. That is always the way God is throughout the Scriptures. When he left Egypt, some Egyptians went with them. When they left Egypt, some Egyptians went with them. "We want to follow your God." It's always been God's plan to save people from every tribe and tongue and kindred through Jesus Christ.

But back to our point in Ezra 9, we're to be appalled at what God is appalled at. We're not to be appalled at what we tend to be appalled at and let's think about something we tend to be appalled at that they were not appalled at. We are not to be appalled at our circumstances, we're to be appalled at our sinfulness and you see this, an amazing contrast, that when the Spirit of God is at work in your life, when you're really drawing near to the Lord and he's at work to bring you to himself in a deeper way, what will happen is you will be appalled at what he is appalled at. He's not appalled at your circumstances, he's appalled at your sinfulness, and when he's working in your heart and you are responding to him, you will be much more appalled at your sinfulness than you are your circumstances. In fact, when you're rightly appalled at your sinfulness, your circumstances you see are actually grace. That's when you know God's working in your life. You're in a hard circumstance and you're under a weight of great adversity and you don't know if you can continue on, and when God begins to show you the sinfulness that he's dealing with and you see it and you run to Christ and you marvel that God has been so kind to you to expose the sinfulness and to let you see the sufficiency of your Savior.

Let me show you this though. It's really astounding when you look at it and think it through. He says, I mean, they're appalled at the unfaithfulness of the people, right? They're appalled at the wickedness of the people and Ezra shares in that and confesses our iniquities, but look at verses 8 and 9. Look at their circumstances. The circumstances of the people of Israel who have returned from the captivity in the first return and the second return, now their circumstances are the same. What are their circumstances? The key word is "bondage." Look at this, verse 8, "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in

His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage." That word is gonna be repeated in just a moment. Look at verse 9, "For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us." Two times "bondage," and then one time the indicative statement, "we are slaves," and when you read this passage carefully, you see that Ezra and the people in whom God is working are not appalled that they are in bondage and that they are slaves. They are appalled at their guilt and their iniquity. We tend to be appalled at our circumstances, don't we? This is the way the world thinks. The world cannot understand how you can say, "I'm in bondage, I'm a slave, and yet I'm not appalled, I'm not asking God to change my circumstances and even to set me free, though that would be desirable. No, I have a much bigger problem than that, spiritually I'm a slave of sin."

It's really interesting that Ezra says, "we are slaves," and I couldn't help but think about another passage where the Jews protest that they've never been slaves. Do you remember that? Do you think about that passage? Turn to John 8. Jesus in his earthly ministry, he says something wonderful, probably a verse many of you memorized, John 8:32. We'll start reading at verse 31, John 8:31. Ezra said, "we are slaves, we are in bondage," but he's not concerned about that, he's concerned about their sin. Look what Jesus said, John 8:31, "So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" The truth will make you free he says to these Jews and they say, "They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone.'" That is just astonishing. I mean, how about Egypt for 400 years? And how about under the Babylonians? And then how about under the Persians? Like Ezra, "Have you guys not ever read your Bible?" And how about after the Persians, the Greeks? And how about after the Greeks, the Romans who are presently your masters? And they have the audacity to say, "We are proud, we are free, we've never been enslaved to anyone. What are you talking about freedom?"

What is Jesus talking about though? "Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.'" He says, "Why I've come to deliver you from is the true slavery of your souls, the slavery to sin." That's why Ezra can say we're in bondage, we're slaves, but he's not even asking God to change that at all. That's not anything to do in the prayer or the book of Ezra/Nehemiah. They're not asking to be set free from their slavery to the Persians. Ezra had a heart like Jesus did. He's praying for freedom from the slavery of sin.

I was sharing this, we were talking about this the other day, Ted and I were talking about this a little bit, that one of the things that's really staggering is that Jesus when he came, he could have ended the practice of slavery. He could have said, "I declare and emancipate every slave in the world right now." He could have told Paul, "Paul, when you preach, you preach not slaves obey your masters, you preach everybody rebel against authority." But Jesus didn't do that. Now let me say something, listen to me very carefully: the Bible rightly understood, the whole Bible rightly understood shows that every single person is equal before God and slavery is a crime in the sense that's it not right. There should never be slavery. We're all made equal in the eyes of God, in the

image of God with the same dignity before God, and we should respect one another and love one another but in a fallen world where sin is, slavery has been a part of history and continues to be today. I was reading about how American soldiers were enslaved by Muslims in the early 1800s and Muslims are still enslaving people today. It's still happening.

Why did Jesus not fix the slavery issue when he came? Why didn't he make that primary? Let me give you an illustration. If you were to go to the hospital, you were in a car accident, God forbid, but you're in a car accident and your leg is broken, and maybe it's really broken badly, it's a compound fracture of your leg. But you also have you're bleeding from your head. You may have a brain injury. What kind of doctor is going to first fix your fracture? Is the doctor not gonna deal with what really is threatening your life? Not whether you're gonna walk again, but whether you're gonna live? He's gonna deal with, this is what triage means, you deal with the people who are near death after a tragedy, who need to have their lives protected. This is why God is not so into social justice as many people are today. God is into spiritual righteousness. He was concerned about the souls of people and he knows that if we become preoccupied with social justice, we will easily forget the real tyranny of the soul, that people are slaves of sin and you may fix some things because every society has its injustices, of course, it's a sinful world, and it's legitimate in its right place to address those things and like I said earlier, I think Christianity is what undid slavery. William Wilberforce in England, a man, a godly man under the inspiration of John Newton who wrote "Amazing Grace," Wilberforce pressed hard against the institution of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe and the amazing book "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which through ignorance is not respected as it should be. People are just ignorant. They don't know. That book that describes Uncle Tom, Uncle Tom was a hero. When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe do you know what he said? He said, "So this is the woman who started this war." That book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," he's saying started the war.

And so Christianity rightly understood gives a worldview that says, "Of course these things are wrong," but it's not the main thing, and so you and I are supposed to be about secondary things until secondary things are appropriate. The first thing is people are dying and going to hell. People are enslaved to sin and so everything in its place, yes, but don't forget the main things are the main things, and to God the main thing is the tyranny of sin and don't be distracted from the tyranny of sin by what you find appalling in society. There's always gonna be things that are appalling in society and if it's not in society, it may be in your family. You may be appalled by the way you're treated by someone you love and it may genuinely need to be addressed, and if it's in the church and they're a believer, then we need to be involved in helping you address that. But you should not be mostly appalled about how you're being treated, you should be mostly appalled about your own sin, and when you're rightly appalled about your own sin, the you can begin to see. You have to get the log out of your own eye before you get the speck out of your brother's.

When back in Ezra 9, Ezra is talking about this is what he's appalled about, verse 6, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our

iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens." It's not about our societal situation. No, what I'm appalled about is our iniquity. Our guilt has grown even to the heavens, and look there's kind of a chiasm in verses 6 and 7, an A, B, B, A, iniquity, guilt, guilt, iniquity. Look what he says, "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities," we have been under judgment. Same thing comes up again in verse 13, "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve." When you're really, when the Spirit of God is at work in your life to bless you, you will be mostly appalled at your own sinfulness and you'll be appalled at the sinfulness of people around you, yes, but your sin first. Not your sin only. No. You don't get the log out and leave the speck. You get the log out and then get the speck out. Do you see what I'm saying? You address sin in other people absolutely, if you love them you will, but when the Spirit is working, you're appalled at what you should be appalled at and that is our sinfulness, mine and yours is what is appalling.

What are you appalled about in your life right now? What do you wish you could change? What do you most want to change in your life right now? It's okay to want to have a good diagnosis. I mean, we pray for Jack, we pray that he's going to receive a diagnosis of wellness, he's gonna get well, absolutely, but you know, even as we pray for him, we need to be careful of not being appalled at his circumstances but being, not that we know his sin, we know God does, but we're praying that, "Lord, will You use this to bless my brother and just draw him closer to You spiritually? Use it the way I would want You to use it in my life to make me more like Christ. Do that for him."

So what are we to be appalled at? Our sinfulness, yours and mine. So if the Spirit of God is actively at work in your life, if God is awakening you, you will be afraid of what you should be afraid of, you'll be appalled at what you should be appalled at and, thirdly, you will be amazed by what you should be amazed by. In this prayer, Ezra is amazed by the grace of God. Knowing that he's now appalled at what he should be appalled at and afraid of whom he should be afraid of, he's amazed by the grace of God. He cannot believe God has been so kind to them and he can barely imagine that God's kindness could continue. He's not a man sitting there shaking his fist at God, blaming God, he is amazed that God would even have a thought of blessing and forgiving.

You see this in verses 8 and 9 as we just read, "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown." In verse 7 we were in open shame, great guilt, iniquities, over our heads and yet, "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown." In these circumstances that many people would look at and say, "I don't want to live like that. I don't want to exist in a circumstance like that," Ezra says, "It's amazing that God is looking on us with favor in our present circumstances." Grace has been shown from the Lord our God and he's left us an escaped remnant. In fact, that word is used four times in the passage, once in verse 8, verse 13, "You have requited us less than our iniquities deserve," you have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, you have disciplined less than we deserved, "and have given us an escaped remnant." We have somehow a remnant. In verse 14 as well, if we continue there may be no remnant who escapes. Verse 15, "O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day." He's amazed at

the grace of God, God's kindness in keeping a remnant for himself. And look at verse 9, ""For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness." You know, our hearts need to be such that we would say that, "No matter what our circumstances, Lord, what I want more than anything is not circumstantial blessing, I want Your lovingkindness to be with me. In whatever circumstance I find myself, do not leave me. Lord, be with me in Your lovingkindness upon me, and if it means to have Your lovingkindness I must suffer, then let that be."

That's the mark of a person in whom the Spirit is awakening, an understanding of reality as it really is. This life is short so if we spend all our time thinking about getting our lives in order, even, you know, requiting situations and straightening things out, in many ways it's just like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. What matters is what's coming, the world to come, and when we see it correctly, it gives us such clarity.

He speaks of God giving, God granting. The word in verse 8, may he enlighten our eyes and grant us, our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving, a little life. It says the same thing in verse 9, "we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia," therefore able to come back, he's saying, "to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God." He's given us reviving. He's given us life.

When you see things as they really are, then you realize that God is dealing with you and he's giving you so much better than you deserve. He's so kind. When we really see as he sees, we marvel, "How can it be? How can it be that You can show kindness to a filthy sinner like me? How can it be?" And when you understand that, you are free. You are at liberty. You can be in any circumstance and have joy. You can walk into the uncertain future no matter what comes tomorrow, yeah, you will struggle a little bit, you'll be disheveled, but if you set your eyes on what really is, what really is true, who I am before God, laid bare before him with whom I have to do, no hope and yet I have found Christ and in him I am righteous, what can man do to me? He can only kill my body. I love the one who holds my soul and he loves me. That is freedom and when the Spirit of God is at work and begins to work in your life, these realities become more and more clear. We fear what we ought to fear. We're appalled at what we ought to be appalled at and we're amazed at what we should be amazed at, amazed by, that God could through Jesus Christ save a sinner like me; that he could send his Son and do something to transform you and me from filthy sinners who deserve hell forever and he could make it so that justly, because he punished our sins in Christ fully, that's why Jesus suffered like he did. He poured out his wrath on his Son. What manner of love the Father has given to us, that we who were enemies should be called the sons of God?

When you understand that, you need nothing else and then you're free to walk in the assurance of that and to do good as you're able to all men. You become a friend of everyone in the sense that you're gonna bless them and love them and point them to Jesus. That's what it looks like when the Spirit of God is at work in our lives. May God help each of us to experience that more and more.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we praise You for the clarity that Your word brings. Lord, it brings clarity to our thinking. It shows us how we fret, we worry, we're afraid about all the wrong things. The concerns of life have a place, they ought to have a measure of our thinking and our concern, but they tend to dominate our thinking, they tend to dominate our hearts, and we're so grateful that Your word has a way of cutting through all of that and showing us all that really matters is where we stand before You, what You think about us, and Your word with its righteous commandments held up against our heart shows that we are without hope, as we saw earlier, Lord, we're murderers because we call other people fool, we're adulterers because we lust, Lord, our hearts are open and laid bare before You and they are sinful. There's no hope for us in ourselves but, Lord, we're grateful that Your holy law which came with all of its righteous commandments also came with a sacrificial system. You said, "Do this and you shall live, and if you don't do this, you will die," and at the same time You said, "When you sin, offer a sacrifice," and all of that was pointing to the one sacrifice that would happen for all time, for all who would believe, at Calvary when Jesus Christ was sacrificed for sin. Lord, help us cling to His cross, trust only in His finished work, His payment for our sins and His holy life of righteousness as our righteousness. We praise You that You raised Him from the dead to show that He had made a perfect sacrifice, He had made a perfect offering, His life was a perfect life. And thank You, Lord, that we now can come to Your throne room and it's not a throne of judgment, it is a throne of love and compassion and mercy for those who are in You. We pray for those here today that do not know that reality of a true saving relationship with Jesus. Lord, help them to run to Christ right now, to repent of their sins, to turn from everything else and to lay hold of Jesus by faith. And Father, help all of us to have Your Spirit at work in our lives more and more and more. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.