

The Freewill Offering and Biblical Reformation

Ezra 7:15-23; Romans 12:1

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Rev. Greg L. Price

What is the end or goal of our election in Christ, our redemption in Christ, our justification, our adoption, our sanctification, and our glorification? Very simply, it is that God be glorified by conforming us to the image of His own dear Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). All that God has sovereignly and graciously accomplished for you in Christ Jesus, dear child of God, and everything that God has lovingly and wisely brought, is bringing, and will bring into your life, is for this divinely appointed purpose: to make you look like Jesus Christ, both spiritually and bodily (Philippians 3:21).

If we would reign with Christ, we must suffer with Christ. That may be difficult for us, who enjoy by God's grace so many of the comforts of this life. You see, dear ones, the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not ensure that we who trust in Christ by faith alone will not suffer in this life, it ensures that our suffering is not from the avenging wrath of God, but rather that our suffering is from the loving hand of our Heavenly Father (who has been reconciled to us through the atonement of Christ). The Gospel removes the evil of afflictions, but not afflictions; for afflictions are one of the means God uses to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.

Dear ones, if the doctrine we profess with our lips is not being manifested in our being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (gradually and by degrees), there should be flashing red lights going off in our minds. For, the end and goal of God's commandments and Christ's doctrine is "charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Timothy 1:5). Likewise, the end of biblical reformation is not mere agreement in doctrine (that is important and necessary), but is rather conformity to the image of Jesus Christ within our lives, our families, our churches, and our nations. A faith in and love for Jesus Christ that has the practical effect of us offering our lives as living sacrifices to the Lord, for all of the mercies He has so richly bestowed upon us as His redeemed children.

Let us continue our study of the biblical reformation that was promoted in Israel through a Gentile King and a Israelite Priest according to our text in Ezra 7. We will be focusing our attention this Lord's Day upon Ezra 7:15-23. The main points for the sermon are the following: (1) A Freewill Offering Presented by the People for a Biblical Reformation (Ezra 7:15-20); (2) The Urgency for a Biblical Reformation Is Revealed (Ezra 7:21-23).

I. A Freewill Offering Presented by the People for Aa Biblical Reformation (Ezra 7:15-20).

A. It was noted in the previous sermon that there is a significant emphasis on the concept of a freewill offering in this written decree of King Artaxerxes, which is foundational to the biblical reformation in Israel at that period of time under consideration. You will recall that a freewill offering was an offering presented to God **without any stated obligation to do so within God's Law**—an offering freely made to the Lord out of mere love, joy, and gratitude to God for His many mercies (Exodus 36:3; Leviticus 22:21).

1. Where did King Artaxerxes learn about the freewill offering that is addressed by the Lord in God's Law? King Artaxerxes was the son of King Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther. Esther (who delivered the Jews from the fatal plot of Haman in the Book of Esther) was chosen by King Ahasuerus to be his wife and queen, and Mordecai was chosen by King Ahasuerus to be a great ruler within the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes may have learned about the God of heaven and the freewill offering from Esther or from Mordecai. But it's also possible that he was taught the significance of the freewill offering by Ezra himself—who requested from King Artaxerxes the support and supplies to continue the biblical reformation begun in Israel. I submit that the

freewill offering is foundational to the continuation of reformation in Israel at that time, and is foundational to any true reformation that has occurred in Scripture or history subsequent to the time of the Apostles. For unless God's people freely offer themselves to the Lord out of hearts of gratitude and love for the mercies of the Lord, there will be no true or lasting reformation.

2. The first time we see the Aramaic word for the freewill offering in this decree of King Artaxerxes is in Ezra 7:13 ("which are minded of their own free will"), where it refers to God's people not merely having the right doctrine in promoting a covenanted reformation, but offering themselves willingly as a freewill offering to God, for all of the mercies they had received from the hand of the Lord.

a. This would seem to be the truth that lies behind the urgent plea of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (see also Romans 6:13,19). According to Paul, we as Christians are to offer ourselves to the Lord as a living sacrifice on the ground of God's mercies shown to us, which mercies are identified and explained in Romans 1-11: our election according to God's grace, our undeserved redemption in Christ, our free justification in Christ, our adoption as the very children of God etc. The "therefore" (in Romans 12:1) points back to all of these undeserved mercies as the basis for Paul's appeal to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God or freewill offering to the Lord.

b. Jesus Christ, being the antitype and fulfillment of all freewill offerings, freely and willingly offered Himself as a sacrifice to God for us, who deserved God's everlasting condemnation. Now we are to freely offer ourselves to God as another aspect of our being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Our obedience to God is not only motivated from obligation and duty to Christ as our Sovereign Lord and Creator, but is also motivated from a thankful and loving heart to Christ as our Redeemer, who willingly and freely became our Freewill Offering—because He loved us and wanted to redeem us, even at the cost of suffering the wrath of God for us.

c. The motivation for our obedience (and a biblical reformation) is clearly declared by the Lord Himself in the Preface to the Ten Commandments as found in Exodus 20:2: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." You see, dear ones, our motivation for biblical reformation in our own life, family, church, and nation is out of duty to God as Lord, and out of love to God as Redeemer. I submit to you, dear ones, that the only way God's commandments will not be a grievous burden for you to bear (but rather a joy and delight to obey) is if you willingly present yourself to God daily as a living freewill offering, for all the inexhaustible mercies and graces freely bestowed upon you through Christ, God's Freewill Offering for sinners. There is no true, lasting reformation that will come to church or state that is not founded upon the Freewill offering of Christ and the freewill offering of the majority of individuals and families within church and state (no matter how sound the doctrine that is professed or how pure the worship that is practiced)—without the freewill offering, obedience and reformation will become a mere obligation and cold formality.

B. Moving further now into the decree of King Artaxerxes to promote reformation in Israel, not only is there to be a freewill offering of lives and persons to God for all His mercies, but there consequently follows a freewill offering of time, talent, and treasure to God for all of His unfathomable mercies as well (Ezra 7:15-16).

1. We can once again talk about offering our lives as living sacrifices and go through the motions of doing so in prayer, but the evidence that we are daily becoming a freewill offering to God out of love and gratitude for all His mercies freely bestowed upon us is seen in our works. The mercy of Christ's work in becoming our Freewill Offering begets mercy in our works as we willingly offer our time, talents, and treasures as freewill offerings to serve God and others. Mercy received from the Lord begets mercy bestowed upon Christ's Church.

2. When individual Christians have drunk freely, richly, and abundantly of the mercy of

God that is in Christ Jesus, there will be a corresponding mercy that is manifested toward others. Such a mercy received, appreciated, and delighted in will have the effect of subduing a harsh attitude, critical nature, double-standards, and cruel words in our marriages and families. I challenge you to examine the content of your speech in your home. How much of it is criticism of one another or of others? How much of our meal is roasting one another (and that observed by our children and then characterizes them as well). Yes, we must judge righteously when it comes to sin and error, but I know the sin of my own heart and how easy it is to fall into mere criticism (which is rooted in pride and conceit). I submit that we ask the members of our family how they see us. For one that is full of criticism is not one who is likely to be characterized by encouraging, appreciating, and being thankful for others. Where such sinful attitudes and behavior exist in the life of a Christian, I submit there is not due appreciation and reflection of God's mercy to oneself as one undeserving of the least blessing (Matthew 18:23-35). Those who understand and bask in the fullness of God's mercy to them in Christ Jesus (who became our willingly became our Freewill Offering) rejoice in the gifts and graces of others (they are not absorbed in their own misery, self-pity, envy, or discontentment). For mercy received and appreciated from the Lord begets mercy toward others.

C. Note the freewill offering that was given by the King and his Counselors, by fellow Jews in captivity, and by the priests: silver and gold to support the ongoing reformation of the church in Israel (that the worship of God's people might be offered to the Lord in the House of the Lord): "for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:16); "upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:17); "for the service of the house of thy God" (Ezra 7:19); "for the house of thy God" (Ezra 7:20). This is a paradigm for biblical reformation: the civil magistrate, the ministry, and the people present freewill offerings to the Church of Christ so that pure worship may be offered to the Lord according to God's will (Ezra 7:18). Pure worship offered to God in spirit and in truth is that in which God supremely delights (purity in worship that actually brings reformation is according to God's will outwardly and inwardly according to Christ in Mark 7:6-7). Pure worship that God delights to receive presupposes sound doctrine and a joyful heart for all of God's mercies—and among the chief mercies is Christ offering Himself as our Freewill Offering.

1. There is a like emphasis of joy in the New Testament upon our giving to the work and ministry of Christ's Church out of a cheerful heart for all of the mercies received from the Lord (2 Corinthians 8:1-9; 9:6-8,15). There is a duty that lies upon those who are taught the Word to support the one who teaches the Word (Galatians 6:6). But if it is only perceived as a duty that is owed and not a mercy to bestow as a freewill offering for all of the mercies received from Christ, our Freewill Offering, it will be simply a burden borne (and perhaps even a grievous burden borne). Biblical reformation will not continue in our own lives, families, or to our posterity, when service to Christ and His Church are a burden, rather than a joy.

2. Dear ones, what makes a marriage move beyond mere existence to a haven of rest is whether the husband and the wife are daily and willingly offering themselves as freewill offerings first to God and to one another, for all of the mercies received from the Lord. We bound ourselves by way of covenant oaths and promises before God to fulfill the biblical duties toward one another as husbands and wives. Those duties are good and wholesome. I do not want to give you the impression that the word "duty" is something bad or negative. It is not. However, if we only feel the duty to serve our spouse, but do not feel the loving gratitude to serve our spouse as a freewill offering for all of the mercies received from Christ, there will be neither the joy of the Lord in our service to our spouse nor the joyful response in our spouse at our service. For when we act upon and when our spouse realizes that it is not merely because we have to serve him/her out of obligation to God and our marriage covenant, but we want to serve him/her as a freewill offering out of loving gratitude for all of the mercies we have freely received from Christ, a biblical reformation not only in outward conformity to Christ, but also a biblical reformation in inward conformity to Christ will change and transform marriages into havens of rest. And even if you are the only member of the family that is willingly offering yourself as a freewill offering, the greatest incentive and motive for your perseverance in doing so, is

your daily reflecting upon the mercy of Christ to you (an undeserving sinner), as your Freewill Offering.

II. The Urgency for a Biblical Reformation Is Revealed (Ezra 7:21-23).

A. First, the urgency that a biblical reformation be continued and promoted is first noted in the decree of King Artaxerxes by the word “speedily” (Ezra 7:21). Dear ones, we are never to procrastinate and unnecessarily delay biblical reformation in our lives, families, church, or state. We may be hindered in doing so, due to our being in the minority, due to our not having authority to do more, but we cannot “drag our feet” when it comes to promoting biblical reformation. The urgency of biblical reformation is that it is to be done speedily—not hastily, not foolishly, not disorderly, but nevertheless, speedily. Biblical reformation does not require 100% agreement among members. It requires loving and biblical instruction, being willing to answer questions to a point, but there comes a time to act, and to act speedily. For biblical reformation is conformity to the image of Christ, and that ought never to be unnecessarily dragged out because of fear of the consequences that might follow or because it is such hard work.

B. Second, the urgency that reformation be continued and promoted is noted in the decree of King Artaxerxes by the command of God (“Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of God of heaven” Ezra 7:23). Biblical reformation in our lives, families, church, and state is not a suggestion offered by God, it is not one option among many—Biblical reformation is urgent because God commands it. Biblical reformation is conformity to Christ. Since God’s end in saving lives, families, the church, or the nation is not simply to escape God’s wrath (but is conformity to the image of Jesus Christ), biblical reformation has the Divine authority of God behind it. Those who are just content to stay right where they are within their comfort zones will resist biblical reformation. However, let us always remember that biblical reformation is Christ’s Cause, and His supreme authority and command is ultimately our authority in promoting it.

C. Third, the urgency that reformation be continued and promoted is noted in the decree of King Artaxerxes by the good that God would bring upon the kingdom, and the evil that would befall the kingdom if reformation was not promoted (Ezra 7:23). Isn’t it interesting that even a Gentile King understood that if he did not promote a biblical reformation among God’s people (when he had the means to do so), he would incur the judgment of God rather than the blessing of God. King Artaxerxes was not overstepping his bounds as a magistrate in supporting, assisting, and promoting a biblical reformation. In fact, he rightly saw it as his duty (God commanded it) and as his service (as willingly presenting a freewill offering) to promote a biblical reformation among God’s people. For to do otherwise was to bring God’s wrath against his kingdom. I submit that this is the primary reason for God’s wrath against this nation: it will not promote a biblical reformation in church and state (due to a Constitution that forbids it). Dear ones, the Lord so clearly lays out for us in this Seventh Chapter of Ezra the foundation upon which a biblical reformation will be realized in the nations of this world during the millennial reign of Christ over the whole world from His throne in heaven.

In conclusion, let me say again, the reason why biblical and historical reformations have not lasted for hundreds of years (but have been relatively short-lived) is not because sound doctrine and the Gospel were not preached, is not because pure worship was not practiced, is not because solemn covenants were not sworn, but is rather because there was a mere outward form of godliness in the lives of the majority, while denying and not practically living in the power of godliness (wrought by the Holy Spirit) in lives and families who offered themselves as freewill offerings to the Lord and to one another, for the mercy of God bestowed upon us in Christ, as our Freewill Offering. Beloved, we do not leave to our posterity the covenanted reformation to which we are bound in the Solemn League and Covenant, if we leave to them a sound and pure

religion that is simply a religion to profess, but not a religion to live by the power of the Holy Spirit, graciously working and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ. The stated end of the Solemn League and Covenant was not mere outward uniformity of religion (that was a covenanted means to the stated end). The stated end of the Solemn League and Covenant is stated in these words: “that we, and our posterity after us, may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us.” Dear ones, we are failing in our covenanted duties and in a covenanted reformation, if we are only working for a uniformity of doctrine, worship, and church government within this nation and among churches of this nation; for the end of this blessed Covenant is to “live in faith and love”. The living out of faith and love in our lives was that which our forefathers in the faith wanted us to never forget, for it was that with which they ended.

And, because these kingdoms are guilty of many sins and provocations against GOD, and his Son JESUS CHRIST, as is too manifest by our present distresses and dangers, the fruits thereof; we profess and declare, before GOD and the world, our unfeigned desire to be humbled for our own sins, and for the sins of these kingdoms; especially that we have not, as we ought, valued the inestimable benefit of the Gospel; that we have not laboured for the purity and power thereof; and that we have not endeavoured to receive Christ in our hearts, not to walk worthy of him in our lives; which are the causes of other sins and transgressions so much abounding amongst us: and our true and unfeigned purpose, desire, and endeavour, for ourselves, and all others under our power and charge, both in public and private, in all duties we owe to GOD and man, to amend our lives, and each one to go before another in the example of a real reformation; that the Lord may turn away his wrath and heavy indignation, and establish these churches and kingdoms in truth and peace.

A covenanted and biblical reformation (in your life, your family, your church, and your nation) must be begin with an inward reformation of the heart in which you willingly present yourselves as a freewill offering to God and to others for all the mercies God has abundantly bestowed upon you in Christ, as your Freewill Offering.

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