

How Reformasi happens

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[0 : 00] And let's pray to God for his help. Father, we always need to hear from you. And so, Father, we just pray that your word will come speak to us today, that we would be ready to listen, that you would help us to open our ears and our hearts and help us, Lord, to marvel again at the Lord Jesus and to marvel at your great big plan for how you want to bring about your purposes.

So we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, it's been nearly a year since our unity government has been put in place.

And given that at least some members of this government were elected on reformist platforms, what's your report card? At best, it's pretty mixed, isn't it? To be fair, some progress has been made on some fronts.

We've seen the tendering process of some public projects become more transparent. But we've also seen a lack of movement, perhaps even regression on other fronts.

Even in the last week or so, there's been outrage, hasn't there, about the lack of separation of powers between the Attorney General's office and the Public Prosecutor's office.

[1 : 17] You see, while starting a reformatory movement is difficult, sustaining a reformatory movement is even more difficult.

What about God's reformatory movement? Can it be sustained? Now, wait a minute, you might say. Isn't it already mission accomplished?

Last week, we saw that the temple was completed and the people rejoiced. So, isn't everything done? Isn't that what God wanted?

And yet, notice, the book doesn't end with Chapter 6 as the happily ever after. Why? Well, because it's never really been about the stones and the saddled wood.

What God is ultimately concerned with is the spiritual reformation of his people. And that is the real reformatory movement God is after.

[2 : 21] So, how is that going? Well, come with me to the beginning of Chapter 7. And what we have here is a time jump. In verse 1, we are told that we are now in the time of King Artaxerxes.

So, almost 60 years have passed in between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. That means an entire generation has grown up seeing the completed temple in operation.

But sadly, God's people are not in the best of conditions. Other parts of Ezra and Nehemiah and Malachi tell us what's going on.

There are people who are marrying others who followed foreign gods. There are compromising priests and neglect of the temple. There is apathy and even mistreatment of others.

So, God's people are in danger of reverting back to their old ways. Now, isn't that a perennial danger for God's people, whatever age they live in?

[3 : 31] In the early 20th century, the country of Wales underwent a great revival, particularly through a man named Evan Roberts. Though he was not a brilliant preacher, and in fact his meetings were not even advertised, many people turned up to listen to him and they were cut to the heart.

It got to the point where public drunkenness became a non-issue, debts were paid in full, family fields were healed, and churches were fuller than football matches.

But it eventually faded. Evan Roberts himself was later caught in scandal. Many of the new converts chased after new experiences.

As one historian observed, without basic biblical formation, many caught in the revival lack the necessary tools for spiritual growth.

Closer to home, think of Pakelalan, the scene of another great revival. But I'm told that drug abuse is now a huge problem for the community, as the state assemblyman himself can tell you.

[4 : 44] So, what is God's plan to keep his Reformacy project on track? Well, that is what chapter 7 is all about.

God is going to tell us about the person he will use and the mission this man is sent on, so that Reformacy will keep happening.

So, what we're going to do is to take our time to go through the entire passage first, before we draw out some of its implications for us today.

So, firstly, let's consider the person God is going to use. In verse 1, Ezra himself is introduced. And I can hear some of you say, Finally.

Have you noticed he hasn't appeared up to this point? Pretty strange for a book called Ezra. But finally, he makes his entrance.

[5 : 46] And straight away, the writer is keen to establish one key thing about him. In verses 1 to 5, we get a long list of names detailing his lineage.

And we get a little bit bored reading them because we have no idea who they are. But the fact that the writer slows us down here to take in his family tree means he wants us to pay attention.

And the key name is actually the one on which this list stops. Aaron. Now, who is Aaron?

Aaron was Moses' brother. But more importantly for our passage today, he was Israel's first high priest. And so, Ezra is clearly identified as an Aaronic priest.

Other details in this section confirm that. Look down with me to verse 9. And you can see that we're told, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month.

[6 : 54] Now, when was the last time in the Bible the first day of the fifth month was mentioned?

It was all the way back in Numbers 33. And what happened then? It was the day Aaron died.

And so, by marking the arrival of Ezra on this day, God is making a statement. It's as if God is saying, Guess what?

Just like how I raised Aaron during the first exodus to guide God's people, now I am raising another Aaron in this second exodus to continue guiding my people.

It's okay that Aaron's there. Here's another Aaron. I'm sending you my priests. But what do priests do? Now, if I were to ask you to provide me a job description, I wonder what you might say.

[8 : 00] I suspect most of you would probably say, Oh, priests are those guys who perform sacrifices in the temple. Priests are those guys who act as mediators between God and man.

And you wouldn't be wrong, but that is not all they do. There is one more aspect that is often neglected. If you were to look back at Leviticus 10 verse 11, you will see that Aaron is commanded to teach the Israelites all of God's decrees.

In Deuteronomy 31 verse 9 to 13, the priests are charged to teach the law to all of God's people so that they will learn to fear the Lord.

The priests are teachers. And that is what the writer is most concerned with here. Look at verse 6. Ezra is described in precisely those terms, as a teacher. So Ezra is presented not so much as the guy who sacrifices, but as the guy who teaches.

[9 : 10] This is highlighted again and again throughout the chapter. Look further down at verse 11 and 12 and 21, and notice how Ezra is repeatedly described as the priest, the teacher of the law of God.

And that is something you cannot take for granted. In Jeremiah, for example, we learn there are plenty of teachers who do not teach God's law.

But that is not Ezra. In verse 6, he is described as well-versed in the law of Moses. The idea is not just that he can score highly on Bible quizzes.

Rather, he is a guy who lives and breathes God's word. Verse 10 tells us this is a guy who is completely devoted to it.

He doesn't just want to know what it says, but what it means. It's his obsession. So, just imagine Ezra as he sits at his desk with the Torah open in front of him.

[10 : 21] As he reads Genesis 1 and 2, he marvels at how God is clearly the one who creates and rules over all things. He learns that it is God, not the sun or the moon or the animals, who alone deserve all our worship.

And so when he ventures out, he is not seduced by the thought of bowing to any idol. As he reads Exodus, he is reminded that God is the judge, capable of unleashing all sorts of plagues.

But he knows also that God is gracious to provide a Passover lamb so that the plague does not fall on his people. So he takes seriously the entire sacrificial system, knowing full well that in the face of

his own sin, it is his only hope.

As he reads Deuteronomy, he hears all those laws about taking justice seriously, about being kind to the outsider, about being generous to the poor.

And that is exactly what his neighbors find him doing. For, verse 10 tells us, he didn't just study, he set his heart to do God's law.

[11:47] And think about it, where was Ezra when he was doing all these? He was doing it all in Babylon.

Being in a foreign environment, where the law of God wouldn't have been a priority, did not stop him from devoting himself.

So this is the person God is using. But for what purpose? What is the very mission of these priests? Well, I hope it's crystal clear already, isn't it?

It's to teach God's word. In verse 10, we discover Ezra is not just a guy who is devoted to studying and observing, but also to teaching God's law.

Here is a priest doing his job. And that's exactly what his mission is all about. In verses 11 to 26, we get a change of perspective.

[12:55] Instead of hearing the voice of the narrator, we now hear the voice of King Artaxerxes through a letter that he's issued to Ezra. Now, why is Artaxerxes involved?

Well, it appears that Ezra is in a position to make requests of the king. And so this letter is the king's official approval of some of the requests that Ezra made back in verse 6.

So, what request has Ezra made? Well, the very contents of the letter tell us. Look down with me at verse 14.

You are sent by the king and his seven advisors to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the law of your God, which is in your hand.

So, Ezra is going down to investigate the state of his people. How are they doing? He is like a quality control inspector.

[14:05] And the criteria by which he is to judge is the Bible itself. Is God's law being fully kept in the life of God's people? Are they conforming to his word?

And as I've already suggested earlier, it appears Ezra is right to be concerned. When he arrives, he's got plenty of work to do. We'll see that in the subsequent chapters.

But let's pause for a moment and consider what is happening here. You see, if God's people are going off the rails, it's instructive to discover what God does in response.

Who does he send? A miracle worker? A famous healer? A political saviour? No. He sends a priest's teacher.

He sends someone who can teach God's word. That's the focus. That's how God is going to get his people back on track. That's how God is going to sustain his reformacy movement.

[15:18] Ezra is not pictured as a charismatic leader. He's not pictured as someone with great military power or political influence. Instead, the text puts one thing front and centre.

It is his devotion to studying, obeying and teaching God's word. And that's why he's the man God is bringing to Jerusalem.

Because that's how God is going to fix his people. So, that's how God is going to keep reformacy going. Now, it's a point the book of Ezra repeatedly makes, doesn't it?

And that's why I'm saying it again, too. Again and again, God wants us to know the word of God is our light. It's our lamp. It's our food.

It's our bread. It's our sword. It's our gold and our silver. It is what we most need and what we should most value. And so, God's hand works to make sure God's word comes through God's breeze.

[16:30] I'm sure you've picked it up already. But did you notice that phrase, For the hand of God was on him, comes up again and again?

It is there in verses 6, 9, and 28. And you will see it repeated a few more times in chapter 8 next week.

And what is God's hand ensuring? Well, look down at verses 21 and 22. God is making sure, through utter success, that everything this priest-teacher needs is provided for.

God generously makes sure that he has what he needs to do his job, whether that's silver to buy animal sacrifices, or wheat for meal offerings, or the wine to pour on those offerings.

He makes sure, verse 24, to grant him and his fellow priests the necessary tax exemptions to make sure that their work is not hindered in any way.

[17 : 37] They don't have to be distracted by those kind of things. And consider especially verse 25. What does King Artaxerxes grant Ezra the power to do?

Let's read verse 25. Well, this is how much God wants his word to be inside his people.

He makes sure the king gives Ezra wide-ranging powers so that Ezra is now empowered to set up a judiciary that is shaped by God's law.

You see, this is the comprehensive kind of devotion God is looking for. He wants God's word not just to inform our religious life, but all of life.

And so even the judges here and those in civic life must know the scriptures in order to see to it that justice is done. And if they do not, what is Ezra's job?

[19 : 02] It's the same thing. It's to teach them. Once again, it is God's word that is meant to secure God's reform movement. And it is so serious, verse 26, that serious punishment awaits those who do not obey.

For God knows that any deviation from his word will seriously jeopardize the spiritual health of God's people. It will only lead to their decline. So here is the mission of God's priest, teacher. It is to ensure God's people, renewed by God's word, to live under his rule. It is to secure the right worship of God.

Now, did you notice in verse 23 what King Artaxerxes says? In other words, make sure your worship of God is done in God's way.

Now, what an incredible thing for an unbelieving king to say. And how do you know it's done in God's way? Simple. By checking it against God's word.

[20 : 35] And so that is why in verses 17 to 19, you know, the king frequently asks the people to make sure that they are buying the right things and doing what is in accordance with the will of God.

As they are taught to follow God's word, the people will do God's will and they will please God with their worship. So well done on patiently working through Ezra 7 with me so far.

But I'm sure you want to know, so what? What are the implications for us in the here and today?

And it is very tempting, isn't it, to immediately say, okay, the main application is we should be devoted to God's word just like Ezra.

Or let's obey the law of Moses and everything will be fine. But if you've been hearing me preach the Old Testament for a while, I hope by now you will recognize that we shouldn't be too quick to make that jump.

Because let me explain what will happen if we draw that kind of direct application too quickly. We will become Pharisees.

[21 : 58] We will become Pharisees. You see, what were the Jews like after Ezra's time? History tells us.

Many of them did indeed draw that kind of application. They studied the law diligently. They were careful. They hated the idea of making images of God.

They kept the Sabbath steadfastly. They did not use Yahweh's name in vain. In fact, the impact of Ezra was so great that in the rabbinic tradition, Ezra has sometimes been described as the father of Judaism.

But in the end, although many followed Ezra's reforms, that wasn't enough. Because look at what Jesus says about the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

Here's verses 3 and 4 on the screen. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

[23 : 17] Or verses 5 to 7. Everything they do is done for people to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long. They love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues.

They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by others. Or here's verses 25 and 26. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites.

You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

Blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and dish and then the outside also will be clean.

So Jesus says, look at these guys. On the outside they follow the law. On the outside they are incredibly concerned with righteousness. But on the inside all they want is attention.

All they do is overburden people. True reformatory has not happened yet. Because the problem is their hearts and my heart and your heart.

[24 : 34] So to just say, okay, let's be devoted, let's follow the law, is not enough. That simply puts us on the pathway to becoming Pharisees.

Now, does that mean we shouldn't be devoted or take God's law seriously? Of course not. In a moment we'll see that Ezra can and should be an example to us.

But that is not where we should start. So where should we begin? Well, let's ask again, what have we learned so far about Ezra?

We've learned Ezra is a good priest, he is devoted, he can teach, he is brave, he takes action. But we also now realize Ezra is a limited priest.

He cannot change hearts. In fact, he himself needs a changed heart. That's why according to the law, he needs to make sacrifices even for himself.

[25 : 40] And don't forget, Ezra is an ironic priest, a priest in the line of Aaron. And shall I tell you something a little about the history of the Aaronic priest, it doesn't make for pretty reading.

Aaron himself gave in to the people's wishes in Exodus 32-34 and built an idolatrous golden calf. Aaron's sons, who are priests, Nadab and Abihu, were judged and died when they offered worship in the wrong way in Leviticus 10.

And so being part of Aaron's line in that sense is nothing special. They might be priests but they are still sinners like everybody else.

So we've asked that question, what have we learned about Ezra? But now we ask, how does Ezra in this chapter point us forward to Jesus?

What happens when we read Ezra 7 through a gospel lens? You see, whenever we try to apply an Old Testament passage, those are the type of questions we must ask first.

[26 : 56] So let's think about it. In Jesus' day, the people were also hoping for a Messiah to spark off the mother of all reformatory movements.

They were hoping for a majestic warrior to deliver them or at least one who would conquer via signs and wonders. And yet, who did God send?

Someone like Ezra. Like Ezra, Jesus is absolutely devoted to the study of God's word. Think of a 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, peppering them with his questions, and amazing everyone with his deep understanding.

God's word. Like Ezra, Jesus is absolutely devoted to obeying God's word. Look at what Hebrews 5-7 says about him.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard.

[28 : 07] Why? Because of his reverent submission, his obedience. And like Ezra, Jesus is the consummate teacher of God's word.

How many times have we heard things like this said in the gospels? The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority and not like the teachers of the law.

But here is the good news. Jesus is not just like Ezra. He is a better Ezra.

He is an even better priest. Because Jesus doesn't come from the ironic line with all of his weaknesses. Hebrews 7 tells us that Jesus is an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek. Jesus comes from the line of the king of righteousness. That is what Melchizedek means. Jesus comes from a line that is so great that even the great ancestor of the Jews, Abraham, paid tribute to him.

[29 : 24] And he is a better Ezra because unlike the priest of the old covenant, he can bring about a new covenant. He brings forgiveness, forgiveness, and he saves anyone who comes to God through him.

He brings a deeper and more lasting reformation by writing the law on our hearts. And he is a better and greater Ezra because unlike Ezra, he is not just a priest.

He is the priest king sent by God so that we might obey his word and live under his rule. So what is the first implication of Ezra 7 for those of us who live under the new covenant?

It is to praise God as Ezra himself does in verse 27. Praise God because just as he sent Ezra to his people in the Old Testament, he has now sent his greater priest Jesus to ensure we can live under his rule.

Ezra 7 is meant first and foremost to drive us to Jesus in praise and thanksgiving. Through this battle Ezra, wrath will not fall on us any longer.

[30 : 49] That was the worry of King Artaxerxes. Through this battle Ezra, we can live now in the realm of the King of Kings. God's hand has moved Jesus to come to Jerusalem to become our sacrifice and transform us into worshippers of God.

And that is what we must first grasp. We must say thank you, thank you first of all for our great high priest. We say thank you that we can draw near with confidence to God only because of him. and only then do we ask how can Ezra now be a model to us. After all, if God wants us to grow to be more like Jesus and Ezra himself is a picture of Christ, then in some ways he can also be an example to us even as he is a priest for us.

So let's go back to that threefold description of Ezra in chapter 7 verse 10 and consider what example he sets for us.

And what follows is slightly different from what is in your printed outline. I changed things a little bit. So first off, Ezra exemplifies a devotion to the study of God's word.

[32 : 18] That's how Ezra challenges us this morning. Do we give our all to try to know and understand the scriptures? Now I can be quite an incessant email checker.

I look at my inbox multiple times a day and some of you I imagine can be like that. Maybe not with your email but with your WhatsApp or with your Instagram pages.

Now do you do that with the scriptures as well? Checking in constantly to see what it has to tell you? You see although with some people familiarity breeds contempt with God familiarity breeds affection and as affection for God grows a desire to become even more familiar with his word and his ways through his word grows.

So today why not ask God to help you to grow an appetite to know his word? Why not take advantage of some of the classes and seminars on offer?

And it's not about quantity of information but quality of understanding. The 17th century pastor Thomas Brooks once said it is not hasty reading but serious meditation on holy and heavenly truths which makes them prove sweet and profitable to the soul.

[33 : 52] But second off Ezra exemplifies a devotion to the obeying of God's word. You see although it might be hard to believe some of us do actually enjoy the study we are curious about the Bible we like to analyze and debate we like the idea of being able to give a very smart answer in the Bible study but God is not looking for smarter sinners if the ratio of knowledge to obedience is particularly imbalanced on the side of the former I'm not sure God is particularly impressed by that for as the psalmist says in psalm 119 verse 34 give me understanding so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart in other words understanding and obedience go together imagine if you ask your friend to give you instructions how to operate a certain machine right after he writes it down for you you tear up what he's written and then you ask him again

I don't think your friend will be too happy about that isn't it he'll be unlikely to want to write it down again for you similarly it is doubtful God will give us understanding and you might reasonably say well I'm not gifted to teach God's word I don't see myself ever having that kind of role so how can I show my devotion to the teaching of God's word that's a good question and

I think one way you do that is by asking yourself this question what do you value in a pastor I think that question will expose how devoted you are to the teaching of God's word because are you looking for someone who simply holds your hand and offers you a cup of tea are you looking for someone who will just affirm all that you do or do you value that he teaches and preaches God's word whether formally from the pulpit or informally in conversations now don't get me wrong that's not all a pastor should do but the scriptures are clear it is his main responsibility that's why in 1 timothy 4 verse 13 Paul charges timothy until I come devote yourself to the public reading of scripture to preaching and to teaching that's why

Paul says in 2 timothy 2 verse 2 and the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses and trust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others and so when you give space to a pastor to discharge his responsibility when you don't expect him to have to show up to every social activity when you allow him reasonable space and time to study and reflect and strive to obey God's word so that he can teach it you are I believe showing devotion to the teaching of God's word and thank you for allowing me to do that for Ezra 7 shows us that in the end God's word must take priority in the church for God's reformatory movement to be sustained it is how we grow and mature indeed as we close

I just want to draw your attention to just one more feature in the text look at Ezra chapter 7 verse 9 to 10 again it will appear on the screen Ezra had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the month and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the month for the gracious hand of his God was on him for Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel now what is the link between verses 9 and 10 or put another way why was God's hand on Ezra according to these verses answer because of Ezra's devotion that is what the fall at the beginning of verse 10 indicates God's hand was on him because Ezra's heart was set in devotion to

[39 : 13] God success now that is not to say that if we are devoted God automatically grants success but it does indicate what God loves to bless God loves to bless a sincere heartfelt devotion to study obey and teach God's word and that's why we here at BEMKEC make that an emphasis for imagine if everyone in church devotes themselves to all three things what will happen people will love one another as Christ loved them people will be eager to do the good works God has prepared for them to do people will worship God wholeheartedly and if that happens the world will see a reformatory movement like never before and so will we take

Ezra 7 to heart I genuinely pray we will so let's pray now for God to make reformatory happen father you have spoken in your word and I pray that we would have ears to hear I pray that prayer of Psalm 119 give us understanding so that we might want to obey you and obey the law with our whole hearts I pray this morning you would have strengthened our resolve again to want to come to your word to find its riches there and to taste and see that you are good and father we thank you again that Jesus is our great high priest who has already cleansed us who makes us fit for worship before you and we pray that that would help us to strive on to live for you until the end of our days we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ Amen And