

3. Rise and fall with leadership

October 3, 2013

Every person is important to God and God's work. But, everything rises and falls with leadership. When God wanted to deliver Israel from Egypt, He raised up Moses and Aaron; when Israel was divided and defeated, He called Samuel to teach the Word and David to serve as king. Late President Richard Nixon once said, "Leaders are people who 'make a difference.'" Ezra was that kind of man.

When God wants to judge a nation like the U.S.A., He sends them inferior leaders, like Obama, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi, and John McCain; but when He wants to bless them, He sends them godly men like Ezra.

It was 458 B.C. and Artaxerxes 1st was king of Persia. Nearly sixty years had passed since the completion of the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jewish remnant was having a very difficult time. It was then that God raised up Ezra to lead a second group of refugees from Babylon to Judah to bring financial and spiritual support to the work and to help rebuild the city.

If we had interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, "The good hand of the Lord was upon me," a phrase that's found six times in Ezra 7 and 8. Nothing but the blessing of God can explain how an obscure Jewish priest and scholar, born in Babylonian Captivity, could accomplish so much for God and Israel when so much was working against him.

Having God's good hand upon this man doesn't minimize the importance of his personal purity or his great ability as a scribe, nor does it ignore the great help from king Artaxerxes. God uses all kinds of people to accomplish His will, but if God's hand isn't at work in us and through us, nothing will be accomplished. It's the principle Jesus taught His disciples, "Without Me you can do nothing" in John 15:5.

A. MOVING THE HEART OF A PAGAN KING

Ezra 7:6-10 this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. 7 Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. 10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. 11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel:

I love what v10 says, "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it". It is not good enough for us to know the Word of God, but we must do what it commands us. It's in the obeying of the Word that we are experiencing the blessings of God, not in the reading or the hearing of it.

If our knowledge of the truth doesn't result in obedience, then we end up with a big head for our own pride instead of a burning heart for the Lord; and truth becomes a

toy to play with, not a tool to build with. Instead of building our Christian character , we only deceive ourselves and try to deceive others.

2 Timothy 2:2 And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Before I became a pastor, no one had disciplined me to become a pastor unfortunately. I've learned the Word from one teacher to another bits and pieces by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That is why I am so committed in discipleship of next generation.

Generally you wouldn't expect a priest and scholar like Ezra to dare to approach a mighty king and ask for permission to take a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. Most scholars retreat by nature, they are happy with their books and thoughts, and unwilling to get involved in the everyday affairs of life. But not Ezra!

It is a mind-boggling thing to notice here. The very captor was more willing to release his captives back to their homeland without a condition and even provided the necessary items for the worship of the Lord in their newly rebuilt temple. Only by the power of God.

Proverbs 16:7 When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

B. TRUSTING THE LORD OVER MEN

Ezra 8:21-23 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. 22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him." 23 So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

The whole approach to this trip by Ezra was layered with his prayers. He could easily ask his pagan king to provide him escorting soldiers, but he'd rather depend on the Lord's protection.

Ezra had previously expressed great confidence in the hand of God upon him and his trip. He did not want to contradict these prior words with later actions, in asking the king for an escort of soldiers and horsemen.

We do need to be careful how we interact with unbelievers after we proclaim that we are the followers of the Lord Jesus. If we contradict our biblical principles and precepts, why should they desire to be Christians?

C. INTERMARRIAGE WITH PAGANS

Ezra 9:1-6 When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass." 3 So when I heard this thing, I tore

my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. 5 At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God. 6 And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.

Four months after his arrival, Ezra learned that over 100 civil and religious leaders of the nation were guilty of deliberately disobeying the Law that Ezra had come to teach.

Some of the leaders of the tribes, as well as some priests and Levites, had taken pagan women for themselves and for their sons, and some of these men had even divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry pagan women. It is no wonder that the Lord hates divorce.

Malachi 2:15-16 But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. 16 "For the Lord God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the Lord of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously."

Let's make one thing clear. Our Lord is not against inter-race marriage. But He told the Israelites not to intermarry with the Canaanites because they were utterly wicked and their pagan idol worship would hinder the Lord's blessings to the Israelites.

Some of you might say, "Hey, what about Ruth? She was in the lineage of Jesus and the great-grandmother of David. Wasn't she from one of those pagan nations?" Yes, she was from one of those pagan nations, Moab. But she was not from Canaan. Most of all, Ruth fully renounced her old life and accepted her mother-in-law's faith and her God.

God gave that marriage law to Israel in order to protect the nation from defilement. Because of these mixed marriages, the "holy seed" was being defiled by foreign women from the very nations God had commanded Israel to destroy. The Jews weren't called a "holy nation" because they were better than anybody else, but because God had chosen them in His love and set them apart to do His will. It's through Israel that "all families of the earth shall be blessed" according to Genesis 12, because the Jews gave the world three wonderful gifts: the knowledge of the true and living God, the written Word of God, and the Savior Jesus Christ.

Through their out-of-God's-willed intermarriage, the Israelites started to worship their pagan neighbors' idols and walked away from the Lord just as king Solomon married many foreign women and led him astray from God. They ended up in exile in Babylon for 70 long years. Now after they returned to their homeland, they were starting this stupidity all over again. I like what Albert Einstein said, "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former."

Whether it was intermarriages between the Israelites and pagan people or the unequally yoked marriages between Christian and unbeliever, it has the same reason

and same outcome. It comes from disobedience to the Word of God and pride with defiant attitude toward the Lord; and it results in the backslide of the believers.

2 Corinthians 6:14 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

In spite of all the noise about "religious revival" and "megachurches," God's people don't seem to be functioning well as salt and light in society. The salt has lost its flavor and no longer stings and prevents corruption, because many preachers and pastors are afraid to speak the truth in fear of losing their congregation.

In v6, Ezra said, "I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God," I believe that one of the disorders of today's society is that people are no longer shocked by sins and willing to do something about them. Politicians, sports athletes, actors, and actresses can blatantly break the law and not only get away with it, but be admired by the public. Polls indicate that many Americans don't consider "character" to be an important factor when it comes to choosing leaders.

The inability to blush because of sin is a mark of hypocrisy and superficial spiritual experience, especially for born-again Christians.

Jeremiah 8:12 Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed, Nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; In the time of their punishment They shall be cast down," says the Lord.

Words and actions that would have made earlier generations blush in shame are today part of the normal "entertainment" diet of the average TV viewer. When a nation turns sin into entertainment and laughs at what ought to make us weep, we are in desperate need of revival.

D. DOING WHAT IS RIGHT NO MATTER WHAT

Ezra 10:1-5 Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly. 2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. 3 Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it." 5 Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath.

The Israelites promised to put away their foreign wives and children who had been born to them. If you look at the situation from purely humanistic view, this is a terrible thing for God to expect them to do.

I am sure that these Israel husbands and fathers loved their foreign wives and children. After all, they were their families. But they realized what the Law of God said. They chose to honor the Lord over their own families. Ezra 9 and 10 was a classic example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen.

This applies to our lives as well. How often we compromise our biblical standards to make ourselves pleased? Are we willing to put away the things that hinder our walk with the Lord even if it gives us discomfort or costs us? I cannot answer that for you. You have to take care of your own situation between you and the Lord as I must do the same.

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) It is not good enough for us to know the Word of God, but we must do what it commands us. It's in the obeying of the Word that we are experiencing the blessings of God, not in the reading or the hearing of it.
- 2) We do need to be careful how we interact with unbelievers after we proclaim that we are the followers of the Lord Jesus. If we contradict our biblical principles and precepts, why should they desire to be Christians?
- 3) The inability to blush because of sin is a mark of hypocrisy and superficial spiritual experience, especially for born-again Christians.
- 4) We should be willing to put away the things that hinder our walk with the Lord even if it gives us discomfort or costs us. That is denying ourselves and carrying the cross.