

~Other Speakers S-Z: Classic Christian Writings:

"Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10).

Ezra was a man with a huge responsibility. His task was to lead the people of Israel to true spiritual renewal. Every pastor who has sought to lead his people in this same direction can testify to how daunting the task is.

Ezra's people were back in their own land after years of captivity in Babylon. They had been back long enough to accomplish a good many things, but they had failed to accomplish one thing. In the midst of the busyness of rebuilding their lives, they had failed to give attention to the Scriptures. It fell to Ezra to correct this situation. He was equal to the challenge. The book of Nehemiah describes a great occasion in which Ezra convened the nation to hear the Word of God preached and the wonderful things which resulted (Neh. 8:1-9).

It is important for us to realize that Ezra did not approach the task of spiritual renewal lightly or casually. Our text tells us that he "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it."

Ezra was certainly the Lord's instrument for renewal, but the fact that he was the Lord's instrument was not mere coincidence. He had prepared himself to be the Lord's instrument. Specifically, he had diligently studied the law of the Lord and had himself scrupulously adhered to it. Ezra's preparation of heart for his ministry compels me to make an observation, to answer a question and to offer a word of exhortation.

Observation

The observation may be stated in this way: spiritual renewal comes to and through those who prepare their hearts for it.

The revival the nation of Israel experienced under Ezra is only one example among several in the Old Testament. One of the greatest of these was during the era of Samuel. At that time the people of Israel became so sick of their rebellion against God and its terrible consequences that they began to lament "after the Lord" (1 Sam. 7:2). They finally realized that the only hope for them lay in a mighty moving of God in their midst.

Samuel welcomed this lamenting and began to instruct the people on the pathway to spiritual renewal. Here is one part of his instructions: "prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only" (1 Sam. 7:3).

Centuries later King Hezekiah led the people of his kingdom, the kingdom of Judah, in spiritual renewal. In the course of this revival, he prayed along these lines: "May the good Lord provide atonement for everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers..." (2 Chron. 30:18b-19a).

We do not find references to preparing the heart in every Old Testament account of revival. But we may be sure that it was present even when it was not mentioned. Every great work of God requires preparation of the hearts of His people. John Trapp observes: "An instrument must be tuned ere it can be played upon..."

Question

That brings us to this very important and vital question: What does it mean to prepare the heart for the moving of God's Spirit? In other words, how are the people of God to go about this business of preparing their hearts? Several things could be said in response to this question, but I will limit myself to three.

Believing in the Necessity and Possibility

First, we can only prepare our hearts for a mighty moving of God's Spirit if we believe that it is both urgently necessary and gloriously possible.

When Ezra came along, the people of Israel had been back in their land for a period of eighty years. Things must have seemed to be going very well to many. They had rebuilt their homes, the city of Jerusalem and its walls. But Ezra was not content with the nation prospering materially. He knew that it was possible for his people to have a lot to live with and very little to live for. He knew that the success of the nation hinged upon spiritual renewal.

How many Christians today share Ezra's view? How many of us realize how desperate are the times and how critical is the need for revival? How many of us believe that revival is not relegated to the past, that God can do this marvelous work in these days? He is the same God! And how many of us are doing as Ezra did by preparing our hearts to seek the Lord.

Driving out Those Things That Do Not Belong

Secondly, we can only prepare our hearts for revival if we drive from them the things that don't belong.

Perhaps the best known Bible passages about the preparation of the heart are those that have to do with the ministry of John the Baptist. He was called to prepare the way for the ministry of the Lord Jesus by delivering this message:

"Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough ways smooth;
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God"

(Luke 3:4b-6; see also Isa. 40:3-4; Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:2-3).

When a king of ancient times desired to visit a particular portion of their kingdom, he would send someone as an advance man to prepare the way. It was the responsibility of this man to make sure the king's journey was as pleasant and easy as possible. Low places in the road would be filled in. High places would be leveled. Crooks in the road would be straightened. It was all so the king could come to his subjects.

What a picture there is here for us! If we want the Lord to come to our hearts in true revival, we must prepare the way. Let's face it. There are in our hearts low places of sin, high places of pride and arrogance and crooked, devious ways. The Lord will not come to us unless those low places are filled in, the high places leveled and the crooked places straightened. In other words, there can be no revival apart from repentance and brokenness. This is true heart-preparation. We can have all kinds of other preparations – publicity, promotions and so on – but all will be to no avail apart from this.

Serious Attention to the Word of God

Thirdly, heart-preparation for revival requires close and serious attention to the Word of God.

This is what our text emphasizes regarding Ezra's preparation of heart for leading His people in renewal.

We might find ourselves inclined to dismiss this because Ezra was a scribe, a religious professional. We would be wrong to do so! Revival is connected with the Word of God for all the people of God. We must always remember that revival is the work of the Spirit of God, and the Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

Many years ago a revival broke out in a foreign land. One of the young converts had somehow failed to catch the word "revival." In reporting what was going on to a friend, he said: "We are having a great re-Bible here." The Bible is so central to God's reviving work that, while we smile at his mistake, we also have to say that there is no difference at all between revival and "re-Bible."

We have noted, then, something of the importance of God's people preparing their hearts for revival and something of how they are to go about this. I cannot conclude, however, without offering a word of –

Exhortation

I can put it in the words that David spoke to his son Solomon as he turned the kingdom over to him: "Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God" (1 Chron. 22:19).

David had served long and faithfully, and the Lord had tremendously blessed the kingdom of Israel. It was very important for Solomon, and for the people of Israel as well, to realize that they must not take the blessing

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of God for granted. The key to blessing lay in them setting or preparing their hearts to seek the Lord.

The children of God enjoy His blessing upon their lives at all times. But there are unusual and extraordinary blessings that are unlocked and poured out during times of revival. As long as we are content to live with blessings of God's common grace, we shall never receive these special blessings. But if we will do as David urged Solomon and begin preparing our hearts to seek the Lord, we may very well receive of these extraordinary blessings. May God help us to be giving attention to our hearts in these days!