

## VII. Ezra, The Praying Reformer

Before the Great War there were many signs of a new interest in PRAYER and new hope from its exercise. How these signs have multiplied is known to every one. This one thing at least that is good the War has done for us already. Let us not miss our opportunity. Prayer is not an easy exercise. It requires encouragement, exposition, and training. There never was a time when men and women were more sincerely anxious to be told how to pray. Prayer is the mightiest instrument in our armory, and if we are to use it as God has given the encouragement, we must do everything in our power to bring it into exercise.--Rev. James Hastings.

Ezra, the priest, and one of God's great reformers, comes before us in the Old Testament as a praying man, one who uses prayer to overcome difficulties and bring good things to pass. He had returned from Babylon under the patronage of the King of Babylon, who had been strangely moved toward Ezra and who favored him in many ways. Ezra had been in Jerusalem but a few days when the princes came to him with the distressing information that the people had not separated themselves from the people of that country, and were doing according to the abominations of the heathen nations about them. And that which was worse than all was that the princes and rulers in Israel had been chief in the trespass.

It was a sad state of affairs facing Ezra as he found the Church almost hopelessly involved with the world. God demands of His Church in all ages that it should be separated from the world, a separation so sharp that it amounts to an antagonism. To effect this very end, He put Israel in the Promised Land, and cut them off from other nations by mountains, deserts and seas, and straightway charged them that they should not form any relation with alien nations, neither marital, social nor business.

But Ezra finds the Church at Jerusalem, as he returns from Babylon, paralyzed and hopelessly and thoroughly prostrated by the violation of this principle. They had intermarried, and had formed the closest and most sacred ties in family, social and business life, with the Gentile nations. All were involved in it, priests, Levites, princes and people. The family, the business, and the religious life of the people was founded in this violation of God's law. What was to be done? What could be done? Here were the important questions which faced this leader in Israel, this man of God.

Everything appeared to be against the recovery of the Church. Ezra could not preach to them, because the whole city would be inflamed, and would hound him out of the place. What force was there which could recover them to God so that they would dissolve business partnerships, divorce wives and husbands, cut acquaintances and dissolve friendships?

The first thing about Ezra which is worthy of remark was that he saw the situation and realized how serious it was. He was not a blind-eyed optimist who never sees anything wrong in the Church. By the mouth of Isaiah God had propounded the very pertinent question, "Who is blind but my servant?" But it could not possibly be made to apply to Ezra. Nor did he minimize the condition of things or seek to palliate the sins of the people or to minimize the enormity of their crimes. Their offense appeared in his eyes to be serious in the extreme. It is worth not a little to have leaders in Zion who have eyes to see the sins of

the Church as well as the evils of the times. One great need of the modern Church is for leaders after the style of Ezra, who are not blind in their seeing department, and who are willing to see the state of things in the Church and who are not reluctant to open their eyes to the real situation.

Very naturally, seeing these dreadful evils in the Church and in the society of Jerusalem, he was distressed. The sad condition of things grieved him, so much so that he rent his garments, plucked his hair, and sat down astonished. All these things are evidences of his great distress of soul at the terrible state of affairs. Then it was in that frame of mind, concerned, solicitous and troubled in soul, that he gave himself to prayer, to confession of the sins of the people, and to pleading for pardoning mercy at the hands of God. To whom should he go in a time like this but unto the God who hears prayer, who is ready to pardon and who can bring the unexpected thing to pass?

He was amazed beyond expression at the wicked conduct of the people, was deeply moved and began to fast and pray. Prayer and fasting always accomplish something. He prays with a broken heart, for there is naught else that he can do. He prays unto God, deeply burdened, prostrate on the ground and weeping, while the whole city unites with him in prayer.

Prayer was the only way to placate God, and Ezra became a great mover in a great work for God, with marvelous results. The whole work, its principles and its results, are summarized by just one verse in Ezra 10:1:

"Now when Ezra had prayed, and had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children, for the people wept sore."

There had been mighty, simple and persevering prayer. Intense and prevailing prayer had accomplished its end. Ezra's praying had brought into being and brought forth results in a great work for God. It was mighty praying because it brought Almighty God to do His own work, which was absolutely hopeless from any other source save by prayer and by God. But nothing is hopeless to prayer because nothing is hopelessly to God.

Again we must say that prayer has only to do with God, and is only resultful as it has to do with God. Whatever influence the praying of Ezra had upon himself, its chief, if not its only, results followed because it affected God, and moved Him to do the work.

A great and general repentance followed this praying of Ezra, and there occurred a wonderful reformation in Israel. And Ezra's mourning and his praying were the great factors which had to do with bringing these great things to pass.

So thorough was the revival which occurred that as evidences of its genuineness it is noted that the leaders in Israel came to Ezra with these words:

"We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land. Yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

"Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born to them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

"Arise, for this matter belongeth unto thee. We also will be with thee; be of good courage, and do it."