

Renewal: Holiness of God

Ezra 9

This morning we are in Ezra 9, where after recovery of the Word of God and much prayer, Ezra is confronted with news of Israel's rebellion. He has just arrived only to be approached by Jewish officials who inform him of the disobedience of the people. What sin have they committed? Exogamy, intermarriage with other races and religions. The officials report: "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations." Israel and her spiritual leaders had refused to separate themselves from the peoples of the land. Now what's the big deal here? Why must Israel separate from these peoples? Is this Jewish racism, reverse-anti-Semitism? Ezra responds and as we will see, Ezra's response explains this bizarre behavior by 1) telling us something about God (Holy) 2) Something about man (Sinful) and 3) something about hope (Gospel).

Holiness of God

So in order to understand why intermarriage is such a big deal, we will need to trace Ezra's response to the officials report. What is the problem? 9:2, "For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." How does Ezra respond? "As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled." Why such a dramatic response to Israel's exogamy? Well, one reason is that it was a direct rejection of God's law. God plainly prohibits intermarrying with other peoples in Deuteronomy, Leviticus and so on. This is one of the reasons they were sent into exile. Disobedience to these laws, the very law that Ezra had set his heart to study, teach and do in all Israel. He had labored to bring Israel along in obedience to God's Word. And his knowledge of God's word had brought about a profound awareness of God's holiness. And it was this awareness of God's holiness, coupled with a new awareness of Israel's sin, which left him undone. How does he respond? He tears his garments, pulls his hair, and sits down appalled...until evening. And when evening came he fell down on his knees and spread out his hands to God. What is he doing? Undone before God, **Ezra's reaction is a physical depiction of Israel's spiritual condition.** His actions are the actions of bereavement, what one would do in grief when someone died. He sat as one mourning for the dead, in the presence of the One who is Life. We are told that Ezra trembled. When he was confronted with the sin of the people, Ezra trembled before the holiness of God. The word for trembled is used of Mount Sinai, the mountain that God descended upon to give Israel the Ten Commandments (Ex 19:16-21). We are told that as the presence of God descended the mountain shook, thunder and lightning rippled through the air, and that the mountain was wrapped in smoke and engulfed with fire. The entire mountain trembled greatly (18). The people trembled (17). The holiness of God was so strong that barricades had to be set up around the mountain. If they touched it they would die, sinners in the presence of a holy and pure God. It is in this awesome, mountain-consuming, holy presence of God that Ezra cried out. He cries out: "You are Righteous!" Notice that Ezra's prayer is not for mercy, for forgiveness, for grace, but simply a pure confession. The climax to his prayer is "O Lord, ... you are righteous! (15). Aware of God's holiness and man's sin, and that God could exile or destroy his people,

Ezra responds in worship, in awe. This is probably the highest form of worship: God being praised solely for who he is, and not merely for what he does, for what we hope to gain from him. You are righteous. You are holy. Do we offer God such praise? Do we worship him for who he is or merely what he does, when it is good for us? Do we praise him because he is holy? And in the presence of God's holiness, sin comes rushing forward in our minds. Ezra says: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." sin comes rushing forward. It's as if Ezra is saying you are Higher than my Sin (but my sin is o so high) Flush with shame, he lifts his head and turns his face heavenward. Looking up, as if to peer over the mountain of Israel's iniquity, into heaven. He does not look down, revel in shame, and run from God uttering platitudes of "I am not worthy." Berating himself and reveling in his unworthiness. Rather, they have sinned and Ezra is there, before God (coram deo), to do business over his sin. To humbly take his place before a high and holy God. What is this Holy-ness? Very often we think of purity, moral rectitude, being good. And while that is a part of being holy, it is far from what the angels mean when they cry out: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." They do not sing: "Good, good, good." The word holy means "set apart" and when attached to God, refers to his being set apart in power, majesty, and righteousness. It refers to God being set apart from all other created things. He is the eternal uncreated One who has need of nothing. He is transcendent. Above and beyond need of anyone or anything. Utterly self-reliant and self-glorious. R.C. Sproul makes the point that sometime we make the mistake of lining up God's holiness as one attribute among many on the shelf of his character---Good, Gracious, Loving, Wise, Holy. But his holiness is not simply one attribute among many; it is his overarching nature that colors every other attribute. His love is not wimpy love it is holy love. His grace is holy grace. His goodness is holy goodness. And as a result, it is God who determines what is good, grace, and love, not us. So when Ezra says God is righteous or holy he is referring to God's essential, transcendent nature. His utter god-ness. There is no one like him. He is God and we are not. What does Ezra's response to Israel's disobedience tell us? God is holy.

Preconditions of Renewal

I had the great privilege of getting to know Richard Lovelace, emeritus professor of church history and author of the *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. I took a few classes with him in seminary and had a few meals with him. Lovelace is a remarkable theologian, an theological integrationist. By integrationist, I mean someone who integrates all of life with faith into worship. His intellectual, devotional, vocational, and family life reverberated with the presence of God. Lovelace helped start renewal movements across the US, and wrote the best book on Spiritual Renewal. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* is a historical-theological reflection on renewal movements throughout Church History, movements like German Pietism and the American Great Awakenings. He identifies commonalities between these movements. What made them renewal movements? In *Dynamics* he identifies what he calls the preconditions, conditions, and implications of spiritual renewal. The preconditions of renewal are particularly relevant for our discussion. They are 1) Awareness of the Holiness of God 2) Awareness of the Depth of Sin. Lovelace remarks: "Acceptance of Christ and appropriation of every element in redemption is conditional on awareness of God's holiness and conviction of the depth of our sin...Men and women cannot know themselves until they know the reality of the God who made them, and

once they know the holy God, their sin appears so grievous that they cannot rest until they have fully appropriated Christ" (81). What is he saying? He is saying that in order to know ourselves, we must know our God. And in order to know our God, we must have an awareness of his holiness and a conviction of the depth of our own sin. When we are aware of God's holiness, we see our sinfulness and it drives us to despair or it drives us to Christ, our salvation. Those of you who have been riding the fence of faith, do you know who you are? Who God is? Or are you content to continue making him in your own image, a nice God not a holy God? Those of you who claim to know God, how well do we know him? Do we have an awareness of his holiness and our sinfulness? Are we all driven desperately to Christ or are we coasting along in some cheap kind of Christianity? In Ezra we see a man who possessed a deep awareness of God's holiness and of his and Israel's sinfulness. What was Israel's sin? Intermarriage? Sounds harmless enough? Is it really a sin? Or is this racism? Prejudice. What was their sin?

Sinfulness of Man

Their sin was intermarriage. Deuteronomy tells us that intermarriage was prohibited, and they were marrying non-Jews. Deut 7 reads: "You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵ But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire." So why was intermarriage sin? Is this just arbitrary morality? It was sin because intermarriage was inviting idolatry. YHWH clearly states the reason in verse 4: "they would turn away your sons from following me to serve other gods." **So the reason God prohibited intermarriage was not because of racism but because of religion.** This isn't ethnic discrimination; it is religious purity. God didn't want Israel to contaminate their faith and worship with the beliefs and practices of other nations. To advocate for intermarriage would be to advocate for idolatry. Intermarriage led to idolatry, but no intermarriage would promote purity. Remember, he had created and called Israel out of all the nations to be his holy set apart people. This command was to preserve their faith and promote the worship of the one, true God. YHWH didn't want pagan bringing in their false gods and defunct morality into his chosen people. It was about religious purity, not racial discrimination. It's not about prejudice; it's about worship. Interestingly, this law against Intermarriage is not unique to Israel. Now, you might be saying to yourself, okay, I get that it was disobedience to God, and that it led to a contamination of their faith, but why couldn't they just be more tolerant? Well in the ancient world, preserving your faith and your race was not uncommon. For instance, in Gen 43:32 we are told that the **Egyptians** refused to eat with the Hebrews because it was "an abomination to the Egyptians." They were discriminatory for the sake of their own culture and religion. You see, there were other religions that were equally 'intolerant' or more accurately, concerned about religious purity. Cultural attitudes discouraging intermarriage can be seen as early as the **Sumerians**, non-Jews. Their myth of The Marriage of Martu describes another ethnic group, the Bedouins, as "barbarians who eat raw meat and do not bury their dead"—a group with whom civilized people didn't intermarry. The Sumerians didn't want to contaminate their culture with barbaric practices. But that's intolerant. It's ethnocentric you say. Aren't they discriminating

against cultural practices? Well, let's get realistic and fair. Realistic, who can blame the Sumerians for not wanting to introduce raw-meat-eaters-who-disrespect-the-dead into their culture? Fair, is it fair to project contemporary cultural relativism onto ancient Near Eastern societies. That wasn't the way things worked. People drew tight cultural and religious boundaries and warred against one another. Now, here's the interesting thing. The Israelites were actually quite progressive for their time. They actually incorporated other ethnicities into their community, provided they were converts. So if an Egyptian decided to worship YHWH instead of Ra, they then could join the Jewish community as a proselyte. In fact, we are told that when Israel was released from Egyptian slavery they went up from Egypt as a "mixed multitude" (Ex 12:38). This word mixed refers to heterogeneity, various ethnic groups on the exodus with them. So, you see, Jews were actually quite progressive and inclusive, without surrendering their own religious beliefs. And their conduct in exile among the Babylonians, their enemies, demonstrates that they were not only progressive and tolerant, but they were also loving and outwardly focused. They sought the shalom, the wholeness and goodness of the city. So, the reason intermarriage was considered sinful was because it was contamination of the faith, leading to apostasy not worship. One final reason for Israel's endogamy was holiness. The ground clause from the prohibition of intermarriage in Deut 7 reads: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." Why shouldn't they intermarry? Because they are a holy people, a set apart, called out community for God's special purposes. Intermarriage would contaminate these purposes. To be a holy people meant two things: *Purity of Conduct* and to be a *People of the Messiah*.

Hope of the Gospel

So Ezra's actions tell us something about God (Holy), something about man (Sinful), and they should desperately drive us to hope (the Gospel) in all this mess. Where is the hope? Remember Israel's holy purpose? To be a people of the Messiah. Israel was set apart for the great task of communicating God's gospel to the world in the arrival of his Son, Jesus the Messiah. It was this Messiah who would reconcile the sinfulness of man with the holiness of God. The hope of Israel is what they would give to the world. The Messiah! Israel gave Jesus to the world, so that Jesus could give the world to the Father (1 Cor 10). For centuries, the Jews had been heralding the coming of a Messiah who would rescue and redeem Israel once and for all. No more exile or death. Where death was deserved, the Messiah would impart life. A reviving of the people of God. And so, Ezra moves from an awareness of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man to hope in the Gospel. How does he reach hope? He prays: "But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery." What is this brief moment of favor or grace? It is the return from exile. Ezra looks around and instead of seeing idols he sees the temple, instead of seeing Babylonians he sees fellow Jews, instead of pagan laws he hears the law of God. This brief moment, is the grace of God in rescuing his people from exile. Instead of leaving them in their deserved slavery, he rescues them. He makes them a special remnant, a token of his marvelous mercy and grace. And in doing so he causes their eyes to shine. Why are their eyes shining? Because they gained a glimpse of the gospel, the hope of salvation, the grace of God in rescuing

sinners from deserved death and exile, and in turn, giving them life and holiness. Their eyes blaze with the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). **They know who they are because they know God in the hope of the Messiah.** They know that in returning them to the land God is returning them to the place of his treasured possession. To be his holy people who bring the hope of redemption to the world, so that their story might become our story. He is giving Israel yet another chance to carry out his holy purposes—to be the people of the Messiah. To give the messiah to the world so that the Messiah might give the world to the Father (Jn 3:16). Where is your hope? Are your eyes shining with the light of the gospel? Are we living in the hope of Christ? Israel’s messianic hope brightened their eyes as they hoped in the Christ. Though Ezra had grieved the death of Israel in their sin, he now glows with the life of Israel in the Messiah. God will grant them a little reviving, renewal. And this renewal was to make Israel “a secure hold in his holy place.” The word “secure hold” is literally a “peg.” The temple was comprised of pegs that fit the wood together. In his grace, God not only rescues his people from exile, and restores their holy purpose to give the Messiah to the world, but also pledges to make them holy. Holy as a peg in the temple of God. How would this holiness come? Through the death and resurrection of the Messiah, who would take their sinfulness and give them his holiness before the Father. Jesus Christ would be the great substitute sacrifice of the world, but not only that, he would also be the great gift of holiness and righteousness to all who hope in him. So, do you see? Do you see how all our sinful failures should drive us to look upward, to tremble before a holy God, to confess our sin and his sovereign beauty, and to cling, to cling to Christ our righteousness, our holiness. To drive us desperate and hope-filled into the arms of our messiah, and to display his holy character. To refrain from all sorts of sin and be peculiar saints in the renewing power of the gospel. To allow his death to result in our life. Fellow sinner, do not let your eyes be dull and cast down this morning, look up to Christ and let your eyes be bright, for Jesus is our righteousness, holiness, and peace.