

Ezra's Great Concern and Prayer of Confession

Ezra 9

Ezra 9:1-2 - *“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.”*

Background Notes

Ezra 1-6 is the historical account of the first phase of the Jews' return to Jerusalem from their 70-year captivity in Babylon. Led by Zerubbabel, about 50,000 Jews returned in 538BC, with the permission of the Persian King, Cyrus. During this first phase of the return from exile, the people rebuilt the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies had destroyed in 586BC. After a long delay, it was finally finished in 516BC. It took exhortation by the prophet Haggai, and encouragement by the prophet Zechariah, to motivate the people to finish the job.

Fifty-eight years after the Temple was rebuilt, a second group of Jews returned from Babylon in 458BC. This group included Ezra, with several thousand more former exiles. This second phase of the return is covered in Ezra 7-10. During the 58-year time gap between Ezra 6 and 7, a serious problem arose (v1-2). Some of the men who had returned under Zerubbabel (including some leaders, some Levites and even some priests) had intermarried with the pagan peoples who were living in the land. This was direct disobedience of God's Law. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4, God said: *“Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods.”* Sure enough, that's exactly what happened. It happened in the northern kingdom of Israel, so God allowed the Assyrian empire to conquer the northern kingdom. And it happened in the southern kingdom of Judah, and that's why God allowed His people of Judah to be taken into captivity in Babylon

Ezra 9 & 10 tell us that this had happened all over again, after the return from captivity! Ezra was confronted with this problem when he arrived in Jerusalem. There are lessons for us in the way Ezra responded.

Doctrinal Points

1. When God's people sin, there should be distress and remorse.

Ezra 9:3-4 - *“So when I heard of this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down appalled. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.”*

In those days, tearing your garments and pulling out some of your hair were signs of great sorrow, mourning and remorse. When Ezra heard of the problem, he was shocked and appalled. It took his breath away. He was unable to remain standing. He knew all too well that this kind of sin had brought God's judgment upon the nation, and caused the people to go into captivity.

Recently I was informed about a Christian man who has fallen into sexual sin. My reaction was similar to Ezra's reaction. I'm appalled and stunned, because I respected that Christian man. I'm still in a state of shock. I still can't believe it. When we hear of this kind of sin among God's people, the result should not only be shock, but great distress and sorrow (v3).

When we hear of such things among believers, we may not tear our clothes or pull out our hair, but we should be filled with true sorrow, because this is a family matter. There should be a sense of painful regret on our part, as in a family wrongdoing. Questions such as “Where did we go wrong?” or “How could we have helped to prevent this?” are questions we could ask ourselves.

And our attitude should always be: “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” No one is immune from serious sin. Our consistent prayer should be, “Lord, may we not be led into temptation.” When a brother or sister sins, we should react as Ezra did - because we are family! When God's people sin, there should be distress, sorrow and remorse.

2. When God's people sin, there should be confession of sin.

Ezra 9:5-15 - *“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. ⁷ Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day. ⁸ And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg [foothold] in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended*

mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to rebuild the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

¹⁰ And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, ¹¹ which You commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. ¹² Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.’ ¹³ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, ¹⁴ should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor?

¹⁵ O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!”

This is one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible. Did you know that the three great prayers of confession in the Bible are all found in the ninth chapter of three books? Daniel’s prayer of confession for the nation is in Daniel 9. Nehemiah’s prayer of confession for the nation is in Nehemiah 9. And Ezra’s prayer of confession for the nation is in Ezra 9.

Notice several truths that are recognized and acknowledged in this great prayer of confession:

a. **The seriousness of sin (v6).** “For our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.” A question: Do you recognize the seriousness of sin in God’s eyes - or do you operate based on the world’s opinion of sin? The world says that if an action is shocking enough, then it’s sin, but if everybody is doing it, it can’t be serious. Sin has been redefined in our nation to be “anything that is not socially acceptable.” If it is socially acceptable, then it’s not sin - even if it is witchcraft, perverted sex, or the killing of the unborn.

b. **The effect on others (v7).** “Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation.” **We cannot sin in a vacuum.** Ezra recognized that. Even though he himself and others had not intermarried with the pagan peoples, he was part of Israel. He knew that, in God’s view, the nation had sinned! That same truth is brought out in Joshua 7. One man, Achan, sinned by stealing what God had banned at Jericho - but God said that **Israel** had sinned. So, another question to ponder: is God holding back His blessing on the lives of others in your family or fellowship because of your sin?

c. **The attributes of God (v8).** Several attributes of God are mentioned in Ezra’s prayer of confession:

God’s grace (v8): “And now... grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a foothold in His holy place...” Think of God’s grace towards His unfaithful people in bringing them back from

captivity. Think of God's grace today in providing undeserving people with salvation in Christ, salvation from the bondage of sin.

God's mercy (v9, 13): *"After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet You have punished us less than our sins deserve, and have given us a deliverance" (v13).*

God's anger (v14): *"Shall we then break your commands...? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?"*

God's righteousness (v15): *"O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!"*

What a wonderful prayer of worship and confession for the nation of Israel! Can you imagine what blessing could be the result if our own nation would pray a prayer like this? After all, we call ourselves a "Christian nation." This prayer is more than saying that we're "one nation under God." This is more than saying "In God we trust." This is more than just singing "God Bless America," great as those things are. This is a confession of sin! A truly heartfelt confession of sin would bring about a real awakening and revival across America as a nation, and in our churches. When God's people sin, there should be confession of sin.

Practical Application

Don't be unequally yoked together with unbelievers!

This is an obvious practical application from this chapter. The problem was that God's people had disobeyed His command. They had married unbelievers.

2 Corinthians 6:14 clearly says, *"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."* This Scripture has many applications, but it certainly applies to marriage. Christian young people: please don't settle for a life of remorse, knowing that you have directly disobeyed the Lord in the area of marriage! Don't make decisions based on looks and feelings. Make your very important life decisions based on the truth of God's Word. Don't be unequally yoked together with unbelievers!