



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 20, 2009
Released on Wednesday, September 16, 2009

“Ezra: A Priest for the People”

Lesson Text: Ezra 9:5-11, 15

Background Scripture: Ezra 9

Devotional Reading: Psalm 32:1-5

Ezra 9:5–11, 15

5 And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,
6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.
7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil and to confusion of face, as it is this day.
8 And now for a little space grace hath been showed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.
9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.
10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,
11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.
.....
15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day; behold, we are before thee in our trespasses; for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

INTRODUCTION:

One mark of a good intercessor is that he identifies completely with his people. The greatest example of this, of course, was the Lord Jesus. Although He is God, He became a man and bore the sin of His people. At the heart of an intercessor is a great love and regard for the welfare of the people he represents.

Our Scripture text for this week gives us an example of an Old Testament intercessor. Ezra was a priest, and a priest's job was to represent his people before God. There is no indication that Ezra himself was guilty of anything that had estranged the nation from the Lord, but in his appeal to God, he resisted the temptation to distance himself from the rest of Israel. He stood before God as a participant in the nation's sinfulness.

The life of Ezra demonstrates that a true leader will not shy away from dealing with sin. God is gracious, but He is also holy and will not let ungodly behavior go unpunished. When sin is ignored, fellowship with God is hindered.

Although Israel's situation looked grave, Ezra had the faith to know that he must go to God with the problem.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: 458 B.C.

Place: Jerusalem

Some seven centuries have passed from last week's lesson on Gideon to today's lesson involving Ezra. In the interim, the exceeding sinfulness of the northern kingdom of Israel had caused God to use Assyria to take it into captivity in about 722 BC (2 Kings 17). In 586 BC, the southern nation of Judah was deported by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people of Judah experienced a 70-year captivity.

Under ordinary circumstances, a nation that had been out of existence for that period of time was gone forever. But with God all things are possible. After the Persians captured Babylon in 539 BC, Cyrus the Great issued an edict that all captive peoples could return to their homelands. Then the big question became this: had the captivity cured the Israelites of idolatry, or would history repeat itself?

Ezra 1-6 describes the initial wave of the return from captivity of roughly 538 BC. The dedication of a new temple took place in March 515 BC. In the years immediately after the return, the Israelites maintained a separation from the peoples of the land, refusing their assistance and any corrupting influence that association with them might have brought. Yet in the decades that followed there was a change of attitude. Marriages began to occur with those who worshiped other gods. In 458 BC, God's answer was to send Ezra and others from Babylon to Jerusalem (almost 900 miles away). Ezra 7 and 8 tell of this return, which numbered almost 1,800 men, plus women and children.

Ezra himself was both a priest and a scribe (Ezra 7:1-6). He set himself to have these purposes concerning God's law: to study it, to do it, and to teach it (Ezra 7:10). We assume that Ezra was thrilled that he actually could live in Jerusalem and be a part of the worship at the temple. There he taught God's Word, and he gained the respect of the leaders.

But any jubilation Ezra felt was short-lived. The first verses of Ezra 9 relate that the leaders came to him to report that there were intermarriages by men of Judah with the peoples of the land. Ezra's response was threefold: (1) he tore his garment, (2) he pulled hair from his head and beard, and (3) he sat down appalled until mid-afternoon and the time of the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:3, 4). This is the point where today's lesson picks up.

LESSON AIMS:

Facts: to show how Ezra acted as a priest on behalf of his people before God and restored them.

Principle: to demonstrate that when we sin, we need a priest (Jesus) to stand between us and God.

Application: to equip God's people to understand that we have a priest in our Lord Jesus, who stands between us and God and restores us.

THE ATTITUDE OF AN INTERCESSOR (Ezra 9:5)

1. Why did Ezra tear his clothing and go to God in prayer? (Ezra 9:5)

The leaders of the people had come to Ezra with a report of the people's sins. They were intermarrying with their pagan neighbors and copying their practices. God had commanded the people not to intermarry with the surrounding nations (cf. Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5). He did this because He knew that such unions would lead the people into sin (cf. Judg. 3:5-6). Even Solomon, a man of stature and wisdom, was ensnared by the practice (1 Kings 11:1-11).

Ezra was appalled at the rash behavior of his countrymen. In the section just before the lesson text, we learn that he tore his clothing and plucked off the hair of his head and beard, and "sat down astonished" (Ezra 9:3). Ezra took sin so seriously because he knew that it tore at the foundation of Israel's covenant relationship with God. Israel was behaving in a spiritually adulterous way.

In the book of Ezra we stand near the end of Old Testament history. During their long history, stretching back over many hundreds of years, Israel had repeatedly succumbed to the temptation of idolatry. Now, after spending years in the Babylonian Exile, you would think they might finally have learned the lesson that idolatry leads only to misery. Their failure to learn this lesson is part of what Ezra found shocking.

Ezra demonstrates vividly that he is distraught and disappointed. After spending time sitting (v. 4), probably without uttering a word, he changes his position, falls on his *knees* (v. 5), and spreads his *hands* in prayer toward *the Lord*. His first words describe his personal feelings, that he is *ashamed* and embarrassed even to approach *God*. This sincere prayer of repentance is a first step in a dramatic reformation that must take place.

THE CONFESSION OF AN INTERCESSOR (Ezra 9:6-7)

2. How did Ezra begin his prayer to God? (v. 6)

Ezra approached God by expressing exactly how he felt. God is not some impersonal force. He is a Person with whom we have a relationship if we belong to Him. At the core of that relationship is a strong respect for His greatness and holiness.

Ezra describes the magnitude of the transgressions. He expresses the vertical dimension that is a part of every sin: it reaches all the way to *the heavens*, where God is. Sin has its effects even in Heaven.

The fact that Ezra says *our* is not to be taken to mean that Ezra himself is personally guilty of the sin under discussion. Even so, he is identifying himself with his community (compare Nehemiah 1:6; Daniel 9:5-19). Those not guilty of a sin may still suffer the collateral effects of God's wrath when He punishes the guilty. Ezra knows this.

3. How did Ezra acknowledge that his people's sins were not a new phenomenon? (v. 7)

Ezra 9:7 stresses that their sinning was not some new phenomenon. "Since the days of our fathers" hearkens back to all the generations of their ancestors. And the degree of sin had been "great."

God had been quite consistent in the way He had responded to Israel's sin. He had caused Israel's enemies to oppress and enslave them for a time. The ways of sin had proved to be very bitter.

The warning here is clear. If Israel was going to fall into sin again, she could expect to encounter the Lord's chastening again.

It seems quite possible, then, that this was a public prayer. Ezra was praying to God on behalf of the people with the hope, no doubt, that it was the sincere prayer of the whole nation (cf. Ezra 10:1).

4. What did it mean that Israel was experiencing "confusion of face"? (v. 7)

Ezra used comprehensive language to describe the past sufferings of Israel due to sin. Perhaps the most suggestive expression of sin's misery in Ezra 9:7 is the phrase "confusion of face." Israel's sin had caused national humiliation.

Ezra's prayer made it clear that the nation's guilt extended to everyone. Both the civil and the religious leaders were as guilty as the common people. As in the past, every part of Israel in Ezra's day would deserve the punishment God would send.

5. What national sins (historic or present) should we confess to God right now? What may be the result when we do this?

When Moses interceded for Israel, God agreed to turn away His wrath, at least for a time (Numbers 14:11–20). Expressing repentance on behalf of the people was a priestly duty in the Old Testament that finds expression today among believers who intercede for the nations before God as a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Reflecting on sin and righteousness softens our own hearts before God and influences others to similar repentance. For many groups, materialism, sexual immorality, racism, neglect of the poor, and general complacency about spiritual things are obvious areas for repentance.

THE GRATITUDE OF AN INTERCESSOR (Ezra 9:8-9)

6. What does the "nail in his holy place" refer to? (v. 8)

Despite great provocation, God had shown great mercy. He had allowed a portion of the Israelite people to survive His severe punishment. But the people were not to think they were out of danger. They had been granted a reprieve, but it would not last long if they continued to sin.

"To give us a nail in his holy place" (Ezra 9:8) means that God had given them a place of security with the rebuilt temple. The nail might refer to materials used in its construction or to something solid to grab hold of. In Isaiah 22:23 it is used to refer to a stable, immovable position: "I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place." It is also possible that the nail refers to the remnant of Israel themselves - the point being that God had finally settled them back in the land.

God had granted the reprieve so that Israel could experience a time of rest and comfort. God takes no pleasure in chastening His people. He is not out to inflict hardship for its own sake.

Ezra prayed with gratitude that God had acted to bring light to their eyes. Israel had lost their way, and everything seemed dark and hopeless. But God had placed them in a position of moral clarity and hope. This gave them a time to feel fresh energy and life. From their early days as a nation, when they had experienced the bone-wearying slavery of Egypt, Israel had gone through times of bondage. Now they were experiencing a time of rest and security.

7. What are some things that can hinder the church from being a strong "nail" or tent peg to provide moral stability in modern society? How do we overcome these hindrances?

When asked why they don't attend church, nonbelievers have been known to reply, "Because the church is so full of hypocrites." To this a smart aleck once responded, "If a hypocrite is standing between you and God, which one of you is closer to God?" Nevertheless, it is clear that moral compromise within and by church leaders can greatly reduce our credibility in the community.

A church that identifies itself too closely with the platform of a political party may make itself appear to be less a legitimate moral authority and more a partisan lobbying organization. In some congregations, the effort to be relevant to modern culture may overwhelm the spiritual purposes of the church. As a result, the seriousness of its ministry and timeless message may not be clear to the world. The delicate balance is not to be "of the world" while engaging the world with the gospel.

8. What does the Persian kindness to Israel tell us about God? (v. 9)

Proverbs 21:1 declares that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, ... he turneth it whithersoever he will." At this time in Israel's history, God was using the kings of Persia to bless His people. God can use the most unlikely means to help His people.

God has been a spiritual *wall* for *Judah* and *Jerusalem* in all this. The fact that the wall cited here embraces Judah as well as Jerusalem shows that this is not a physical wall. Jerusalem's literal, physical wall is still down at this point. It will not be rebuilt until the time of Nehemiah, about 14 years down the road.

Another distinctive blessing is mentioned in Ezra 7:24—that the priests, Levites, and other full-time workers at the temple are exempt from tax or tribute. By granting this exemption, the kings of Persia show their intent not to offend the God of the Jews.

THE ASSESSMENT OF AN INTERCESSOR (Ezra 9:10-11, 15)

9. Why did Ezra ask a rhetorical question in his prayer? (v. 10)

Having recounted God's grace, Ezra moved on to admit to Him that the people had no legitimate excuse for their behavior. Verse 10 begins with a rhetorical question – what shall we say after this? Ezra did not expect to give an answer - they really knew nothing they could say to defend themselves. He admitted that they had forsaken God's commandments.

The term "forsaken" evokes a picture of disloyalty and faithlessness. The people had benefited from God's power, but in return, they blithely went off in their own direction.

10. What was the explanation God had given to the people for why they should not mix with the pagans? (v. 11)

Ezra recounted precisely why God had commanded the people not to mix with the natives of Canaan. God had told the people that the land was unclean because of the sinfulness of its inhabitants. If the Israelites adopted their ways, which would be the inevitable result of forming intimate relationships with them, they too would be unclean. The whole structure of the law that God had given Israel, with its lists of unclean food and practices, was meant to keep Israel from the worldly ways of the heathen. These principles were emphasized not only in the law itself but, we are told, by the prophets as well (Deut. 7:1-3; Isa. 65:2-4; cf. Mai. 2:10-16).

It would be difficult to understate the wickedness of ancient paganism. It included such practices as ritual prostitution and child sacrifice. Such things were indeed abominations, practices that defiled and prostituted the Promised Land (Lev. 18:24-28). And the pagan peoples had spread this moral filth throughout the region. This was no isolated phenomenon. There was no way Israel could intermarry with these people in a selective way that might avoid the taint of their sinfulness.

11. What accounts for the way Ezra ended his prayer? (v. 15)

Ezra's sermon prayer concludes with a confession. The opening phrase affirms that *God is righteous*. This word has been defined simply as "doing what is right" or "being in conformity with a recognized standard." Ezra knew that the best possible place for his people was to be at the mercy of the Lord. Israel had sinned, and God was righteous. Ezra was counting on the Lord to continue showing His amazing grace.

Despite the waywardness of Israel, they still had a foothold in their land. God would have been perfectly justified in forsaking them as they had the law, but He showed great patience. We are reminded of Jeremiah's declaration: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (Lamentations 3:22). As Derek Kidner noted, Ezra's prayer "was naked confession, without excuses, without the pressure of so much as a request" (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, InterVarsity). Of course, the very fact that Ezra was praying is an indication that he was hoping in God's mercy.

Perhaps the key point to remember here is that prayer involves a relationship with God. The Lord is not some distant business partner with whom we have to strike a deal through artful pleading. He is the all-powerful yet personal God who has pursued close fellowship with His people. Ezra was coming to Him in this light. Matthew Henry expressed it well: "Thus does this good man lay his grief before God and then leave it with him" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson).

Ezra's intercession had an effect on the people. In the verses following our lesson text, we learn that he had been weeping as he prayed and was greatly exercised. This led to a group

of people gathering around him, weeping as well. Hearts broken by sin are a sign of godly intercession. It is not a bargain being struck; it is hearts being changed.

CONCLUSION:

How long has it been since you heard a sermon on the subject of repentance? A suggested guideline to apply to this lesson is that encouragement be given for the learners to look for those occasions in which they should repent and offer prayers of confession. Repentance, however, is not a popular topic, for a necessary implication is that sin and guilt precede the occasion to repent. This idea is not popular in an age that emphasizes that no one is at fault.

A starting point is to define repentance. One definition is that repentance is "a change of mind that leads to a change of heart (affections) and a change of life." The context of *repent* in the New Testament primarily indicates a change of mind. It is therefore a decision—it is a decision to quit sinning.

John the Baptist, as the forerunner for the Christ, came preaching a message of repentance. He said that the Jews should repent, for the kingdom of Heaven was at hand or near (Matthew 3:2). Jesus preached the same message as He began His ministry on earth (Matthew 4:17).

On one occasion Jesus was asked to comment on Pilate's punishment of a group of people and on any crimes that may have preceded the punishment. Jesus' response seemed to say this: do not attempt to shield your own sins by citing the sins of others, for unless you repent you will perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

The church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter's sermon recounted the rejection of the Lord's Christ, and that message had a dramatic effect on the hearers. They were persuaded of the truth of Peter's message, and they asked what they should do. Peter's reply included the need for repentance (Acts 2:38).

While in Athens, Paul gave his famous sermon about the "unknown" God. One of his statements was that God commanded all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30, 31). The reason he gave was that the day was coming when the world would be judged by the one whom God had appointed. That person is Jesus.

Peter sounded a warning in his second epistle about those who scoff at the promised return of Jesus. Peter stressed that the apparent delay in the return is because of the patience of God. He does not want anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:3, 9).

By its very nature, repentance is preceded by an awareness of God and the seriousness of going against what He has ordained. The person who wants to be right with God will then have a godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9). In addition, the goodness or kindness of God in desiring to provide salvation should lead a person to repent—to decide to quit sin in order to follow Jesus permanently. Repentance is not only a crisis moment in accepting Christ, it is also a continuing process in the Christian life. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9; compare Revelation 2:5).

A prominent teacher in the early twentieth century reportedly said that if he could have any special gift, he would not ask for the gifts of speaking in tongues, healing, etc. Rather, he said that he would ask for the ability to preach in a manner that would bring people to repentance.

Repentance—how long has it been since you heard a sermon on that subject?

PRAYER:

Our God in Heaven, we are grateful that You have given us absolute standards of right living. Without those standards, we drift on a sea of relativism. May we repent of the times we have walked in our own ways. In the strength of Your Holy Spirit, we resolve to walk in the way that leads to eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

The best time to repent is yesterday. The second best time is now.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "**Nehemiah: A Motivator for the People**". We will see how Nehemiah got others fired up to share in the work of God. Study Nehemiah 2:1-20.

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