



# Ezra: Priest for the People

September 20, 2009

***BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:***

***EZRA 9***

***PRINTED TEXT:***

***EZRA 9:5–11, 15***

*[Ezra] prayed: “O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.*

*—Ezra 9:6*

## Opening Song

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### Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

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### Opening Prayer

*EZRA 9:5–11, 15 (NIV)*

**9**<sup>5</sup> Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God <sup>6</sup> and prayed: "O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. <sup>7</sup> From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today. <sup>8</sup> "But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. <sup>9</sup> Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>10</sup> "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands <sup>11</sup> you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.

<sup>15</sup> O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

**INTRODUCTION****A. SECOND CHANCES**

At the age of 17, Alan Simpson and some other teenagers were found guilty of shooting mailboxes and otherwise destroying property. It was a first offense, and he was given the proverbial second chance. The boys had to pay for the damages, and they were put on probation for two years.

As this was unfolding, Alan saw his parents look at each other in disbelief, and he saw his father cry. He just wanted another chance, and he completed probation successfully. Eventually, he became an attorney, went into politics, and was elected to be a multiterm U.S. senator from the state of Utah (1979–1997). He served in that capacity as the minority whip and then the majority whip for his party. In these positions, he did what he could to help others. But at the same time he had no use for those who used false persuasion to con their way out of deserved punishments.

God is also “a God of second chances” and much more—if the ones who have turned their backs on him are sincere in their repentance. In Jeremiah 32:33, the Lord says that he instructed his people “again and again,” but they would not listen. Through the centuries his prophets preached and wrote the books that recorded the messages they had received from God. At times there were temporary responses of repentance, but the idea of the need for repentance is difficult to pass from one generation to another. Yet God continued to provide warnings because of his love. He provided opportunity after opportunity for his people to return to the path of righteousness.

**B. LESSON BACKGROUND**

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. God's original restrictions on intermarriage applied to the seven nations of Canaan as listed in Deuteronomy 7:1. The other nations listed in Deuteronomy 23:3–8 had only a prohibition about being a part of the assembly until several generations passed.

Even so, Ezra 9:1 indicates that a consensus had developed among the leadership that it was safer not to marry anyone who worshiped other gods. This included people belonging to groups listed in Deuteronomy 23:3–8. When Ezra was informed of the problem, his 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.

## ***I. REPENTANCE EXPRESSED (EZRA 9:5–7)***

### ***A. PERSONAL REACTIONS (VV. 5, 6A)***

***5, 6a. Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed:***

Ezra demonstrates vividly that he is distraught and disappointed. After spending time sitting (vv. 3, 4), probably without uttering a word, he changes his position, falls on his *knees*, and spreads his *hands* in prayer toward *the Lord*. This sincere prayer of repentance is a first step in a dramatic reformation that must take place.

### ***B. PRESENT SINS (V. 6B)***

***6b. “O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.***

Ezra's first words describe his personal shame and embarrassment even to approach *God*. Then 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.

### ***C. PAST REVIEWED (V. 7)***

***7. “From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.***

Ezra continues his prayer by recalling that Israel tested God even before it became a special nation at Sinai (see Exodus 15:22–16:7). Ezra is surely aware of the account in Joshua 7 about Achan, who sinfully kept some of the valuables of Jericho for himself. The sin of that one man caused God to say that the nation of Israel had sinned (Joshua 7:11). Ezra knows that many of the Israelites are not personally guilty. But he understands the principle that an entire group may be considered guilty because of the sins of one or a few. Ezra also knows the consequences of national sin: *captivity*, death, poverty, and *humiliation*. The Jewish people have “been there, done that.” He does not want his people to go through these things again.

## ***II. RELIEF ENJOYED (EZRA 9:8, 9)***

### ***A. FAITHFUL REMNANT (V. 8)***

***8. “But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his***

*sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.*

Ezra rejoices that *the Lord* permits a *remnant* to have a brief period of time of freedom from oppression. It now has been 80 years (538–458 BC) since Cyrus the Great gave his gracious proclamation that permitted all captives to return to their homelands (Ezra 1:2–4). The edict of Darius the Great for the resumption of work on the temple is over 60 years in the past at this point. Historically, these time spans are viewed as brief (*a little relief*).

The use of the word *remnant* shows that Ezra is familiar with this important doctrinal term in God's plan and in the messages of the prophets. (This word appears dozens of times in the Old Testament.) Regardless of the sins of the nation and any subsequent punishments, there is always a faithful remnant that is recognized by God (compare 1 Kings 19:18; Romans 11:4, 5). He will bring his remnant people back from wherever they have gone (Isaiah 10:21; 11:11, 12; Jeremiah 23:3; etc.). Until now, the restored nation of Judah has had a *firm place* in God's *sanctuary*. The image is that of stability for what would otherwise be a tenuous existence.

### **B. FAVORED REACTIONS (V. 9)**

**9. "Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.**

The captives from Judah receive favored nation status from *God* and *the kings of Persia*. Since their return, there have been times of provocation by Judah's neighbors (see Ezra 4 for Ezra's summary of such opposition). But the people have been able to complete the temple. 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 or any other gods.

### **III. REMORSE EXPANDED (EZRA 9:10, 11)**

#### **A. SPEECHLESS RESPONSE (V. 10)**

**10. "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands**

Ezra is overwhelmed by three things: (1) the goodness of God that has permitted him and others to return, (2) the favorable actions of the kings who have allowed the nation to be restored when such a task was considered to be impossible, and now (3) the ingratitude of some of those who have disobeyed so flagrantly by having wives and children who can lead the entire nation back into idolatry. Ezra is well aware that the cycle of punishment and exile can begin again. Ezra is a person who learns from history.

#### **B. SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT (V. 11)**

**11.... "you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.' "**

The commands for Israel to avoid spiritual compromise began with Moses. The same message has been repeated through the centuries (Exodus 23:32, 33; Deuteronomy 7:1–3; 12:1–4; 23:6; Judges 2:1, 2; 2 Kings 17:15; Jeremiah 10:2). It will be repeated

after Ezra passes off the scene (Malachi 2:11; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

It is absurd to worship a god that is not a god. Absurdity is compounded when such a practice is used to justify immoral acts that accompany such a practice. The subsequent loss of decency and respect will eventually lead to the destruction of whatever nation is involved. This is a lesson of history that has been repeated time after time. Nations that are considered to be the most powerful in their eras have crumbled and fallen because of corruption from within.

We recall that these kinds of warnings are prompted ultimately by the motive of love. The warnings may be from God or from parents, for both have concerns about their children. It would be criminal to see a child start to run into the street when a car is rapidly approaching and then not warn the child with whatever it takes to get his attention. God is a God of love, and he warns his people.

#### **IV. RIGHTEOUSNESS CONTRASTED (EZRA 9:15)**

##### **A. GOD'S POSITION (V. 15A)**

*15a. "O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant."*

#### **CONCLUSION**

How long has it been since you heard a sermon on 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.

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

Ezra's sermonic 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."

God is the one who sets the standard. God's ethical standard grants forgiveness if sin is sincerely acknowledged. The consequences of sin may remain, and there may be a period of testing to determine if the repentance is genuine. But forgiveness may be expressed nonetheless.

##### **B. PEOPLE'S STATUS (V. 15B)**

*15b. "Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."*

Ezra knows that a God who is righteous also mandates that sin must be punished in some way. There are consequences for sin, and these cannot be escaped by an easy confession. The ultimate demonstration of this is the fact that Jesus' death was a punishment for sin; as such, that death satisfied God's righteous requirements. Jesus' death served as atonement for the sins of others in this once-for-all-time case (Hebrews 9:24–26).

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 (see Lesson 13 of this quarter). 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 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 and will forgive us our sins and purify 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.

### ***THE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE PAST SINS***

*Holocaust* was an NBC miniseries that first aired in April 1978. It told the story of Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews before and during World War II. It was a success in America, as was ABC's blockbuster miniseries *Roots* of the previous year. The latter series acquainted viewers with the emotional impact of America's shameful experiment with slavery.

When *Holocaust* was broadcast in West Germany in 1979, the reaction was unexpected. Fifteen million people (about half the nation's adult population) saw at least some part of the program. One commentator described it as "breaking a thirty-five-year taboo on discussing Nazi atrocities." Seventy percent of teenage viewers said they had learned more about Nazi atrocities from the miniseries than from all their years of studying German history in school. The statute of limitations on Nazi war crimes, set to expire that year, was canceled.

Critics of both TV miniseries claimed the productions took liberties with the facts. Perhaps. But the result was an increased awareness of a dark part of each nation's history. However, no one could criticize Ezra's recounting of the sins of Israel. He spoke the unvarnished truth. Every nation (as well as every person) needs to find the strength of character to acknowledge past sin. Otherwise there is no hope for redemption.

***THE “ONLY-EST” ONES***

“It’s the only-est one there is!” In some parts of the American South, that’s a way to speak of something’s uniqueness. Unique things attract us. As a parallel, many enjoy being part of a group that has relatively few members; it makes us feel special. That’s part of the appeal of groups and causes such as “outlaw” motorcyclists, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and supporters of the most hopeless of political candidates.

Religious leaders throughout the centuries have tried to endow their followers with a sense of uniqueness. God certainly wanted Israel to be unique. He also wants the church to be unique. With that uniqueness should come a great deal of humility. When pride takes over, a perceived uniqueness may become a “holier than thou” exclusivity. The result can be an attitude expressed by this sarcastic bit of verse:

*We are the chosen few; / All others will be damned.*

*There’s no room in Heaven for you; / We don’t want Heaven crammed!*

When Ezra spoke of being part of a remnant, he spoke the truth with repentant humility. Although Israel had largely been unfaithful, there were a few who had not turned from God (or had turned back to God). Now God was going to use those faithful few to renew the nation.

The *remnant ideal* at its best says “regardless of what others may do, we will strive to be faithful!” Ezra’s attitude gives those in the remnant an important reminder: humility is always more appropriate than pride.

**LET’S TALK IT OVER**

- 1. What are some situations (if any) where we should not offer another chance to an individual who has done something wrong? How do we forgive while still enforcing consequences?**
  
- 2. What national sins (historic or present) should we confess to God right now? What may be the result when we do this?**
  
- 3. 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?**
  
- 4. In what ways may God still be using secular authorities to accomplish His purposes for the spread of the gospel?**
  
- 5. In what ways has the moral condition of society both improved and declined? What would revival in our land look like?**

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**LET'S TALK IT OVER****1. What are some situations (if any) where we should not offer another chance to an individual who has done something wrong? How do we forgive while still enforcing consequences?**

Sinful acts may be forgiven by God and by people. Yet the one who commits an infraction may still be subject to reasonable boundaries in ministry and relationships. A church treasurer who embezzles money from his church may be forgiven on his repentance, but should the church ever again allow him to be treasurer? Christian discretion may require that he be given a second chance in areas of ministry that do not involve the handling of funds. The truly repentant person will welcome the discipline and accountability that such boundaries provide, seeing them as a path to restoration. In all cases, we look for evidence of a transformed life to rebuild trust.

**2. 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; see Lesson 10 of this quarter). Reflecting on sin and righteousness softens our own hearts before God and influences others to similar repentance. For many people groups, materialism, sexual immorality, racism, neglect of the poor, and general complacency about spiritual things are obvious areas for repentance.

**3. 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.

**4. In what ways may God still be using secular authorities to accomplish His purposes for the spread of the gospel?**

In some areas of the world, governments protect freedom of religion and provide tax exemptions (or even funding) for Christian ministries. Repressive nations sometimes face diplomatic and economic pressure from the world community to respect the rights of religious minorities. Military intervention may protect foreign citizens, including missionaries, living in unstable parts of the world; this is a legitimate role of government (Romans 13:1–7).

Even hostile governments may be unwitting tools to accomplish God's ultimate purposes. The church in China grew more rapidly after the Communist government expelled the missionaries and the believers started planting their own churches. In modern Iran (which was ancient Persia), Christians quip that one Muslim leader was really a Christian missionary who turned people to Christ by showing how bad Islamic law could be!

**5. In what ways has the moral condition of society both improved and declined? What would revival in our land look like?**

We might find it easy to see evidence of moral decline in the increases of crude television programming, drug abuse, and broken homes. However, some cultures have shown clear improvements in areas such as human rights, lowered rates of abortion, and the rapid growth of the church in the developing nations. Outstanding features of the great revivals of the past have included tremendous church growth, denominational cooperation, and sweeping social and cultural reforms. Most significantly, revival usually follows a long period of persistent prayer by God's people.

***PRAYER***

*Our God in Heaven, we are grateful that you have given us the 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.*