

# GETTING BACK ON COURSE Sunday School- September 20, 2009

## Unifying Topic: **EXRA: A PRIEST FOR THE PEOPLE**

### Lesson Text

I. Repentance and the Results of Sin (Ezra 9:5-7)

II. Giving thanks for Mercy (Ezra 9:8-9)

III. Acknowledging Guilt (Ezra 9:10-11, 15)

**The Main Thought:** And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our inquiries are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens (Ezra 9:6, KJV).

**Unifying Principle:** Sin, wherever it may be found, seems so prevalent that we often do not know how to deal with it. What should be our response to sin? The priest, who had opened his heart and mind to God's teachings, diligently taught the people the laws of God and responded to sin among the Israelites by fervently praying for God's forgiveness and grace.

**Lesson Aim:** To prompt students to be aware of individual and corporate sin, the value of true repentance, and the efficacy of prayer.

**Life aim:** To encourage students to strive to live godly lives and to be quick to repent.

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- 9:5 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,
- 9:6 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.
- 9:7 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.
- 9:8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed 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.
- 9:9 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.
- 9:10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,
- 9:11 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.
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- 9:15 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.

### **HISTORY:**

Ezra was a priest, a scribe, and a great leader. His name means "help" and his whole life was dedicated to serving God and God's people. He wrote most of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Psalms 119. He centers the narrative of the book of Ezra around God and his promise that the Jews would return to their land, as promised by Jeremiah. The **exile** of Jerusalem started with the first deportation in 597 B.C.

When Nebuchadnezzar died, his successor was not strong and the city of Babylon was captured in 539 B.C. by Cyrus the Persian<sup>1</sup>. He established one of the most successful and enduring of the great ancient empires. The **first return**<sup>2</sup> to Judah for the Jews came shortly after the Persian conquest of Babylon, 538 BC (Ezra 1:1), led by Sheshbazzar<sup>3</sup>. The **second** came 80 years later, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I<sup>4</sup>, 458 BC (Ezra 7:7), led by Ezra. And the **third** came 13 years after the second, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes I, 444 BC (Neh. 2:1), led by Nehemiah.

Part of Cyrus' success came from his practice of showing respect for the religious beliefs of his captured peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Cyrus the Great, Cyrus (reigned 550-530 B.C.) was the founder of the Persian Empire; the Elder; King of Persia, King of Anshan, King of Media, King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, King of the four corners of the World.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/11/Israel\\_Restored.htm](http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/11/Israel_Restored.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Sheshbazzar was appointed governor of the province of Judah by Cyrus (Ezra 5:14); led the first group of exiles back from Babylon to Judah, bringing with him the vessels taken from the Temple (Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14) by Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 24:13) and laid the foundations of rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 5:6).

<sup>4</sup> Persian King, succeeded his Father Xerxes (assassinated) and authorized Ezra's mission to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1-7, 11-26).

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In his first years according to both Persian records and the biblical account he proclaimed that all the captive peoples whom the Babylonians had dragged into exile should be allowed to go free (2Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1-4). As he conquered the cities, he treated the inhabitants with mercy. Although not a servant of God, Cyrus was used by God to return the Jews to their homeland.

The Book of Ezra covers the return from captivity to rebuild the Temple, up to the decree of Artaxerxes, the event covered at the beginning of the Book of Nehemiah. Haggai was the main prophet in the day of Ezra, and Zechariah was the prophet in the day of Nehemiah. But Ezra himself does not appear in the book until Chapter 7.

The earlier chapters are devoted to the first group of returned exiles under the political leader, Zerubbabel<sup>5</sup> and the priestly leader Jeshua<sup>6</sup> (Ezra 1:1—6:22); restoring worship (Ezra 3); rebuilding of the temple where they had to overcome opposition from the people of the land (Ezra 4:1-5), but in the end they completed the structure. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to finish their task of rebuilding the temple (Ezra 5:1-2). The temple was completed and dedicated. Ezra points out that rebuilding the Temple was decreed first by God and then by the kings.

The second group of exiles return to Jerusalem led by Ezra (Ezra 7:1—10:44). There is a gap of almost 60years<sup>7</sup> between the events of Chapters 6 and 7. Ezra 7:10 says, *“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”*

Chapter 8, Ezra lists and numbers the people who went with him from Babylon to Jerusalem during the reign of King Artaxerxes. The family heads and those registered with them number totaled 1515 men plus the women and children who were traveling with them. So Ezra summoned a committee of 11 leading men to go and recruit some Levites to make sure the children of Israel were following all of God’s Laws. Before making all the physical preparations for the journey, Ezra made spiritual preparations. Ezra **proclaimed a fast** (½ day) at the Ahava Canal and they all humbled themselves in **prayer** asking God to give them a safe journey, protecting their bodies and their possessions.

## POINT:

### *Why Fast?*

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| <i>1. For Jesus to come back</i>                  | <i>Matthew 9:14-15</i>                            |
| <i>2. For help in a new venture in ministry</i>   | <i>Matthew 4:1-2; Acts 13:3</i>                   |
| <i>3. To avert some danger or threat</i>          | <i>Ezra 8:21; 2Samuel 12:16; 2Chronicles 20:3</i> |
| <i>4. To express sorrow and loss</i>              | <i>2Samuel 1:12; 1Chronicle 10:12</i>             |
| <i>5. To express repentance and grief for sin</i> | <i>Joel 2:12-13</i>                               |
| <i>6. Not for the praise of men</i>               | <i>Matthew 6:16-18</i>                            |

Once in Jerusalem, the leaders of the children of Israel came to Ezra and said, **“The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them”** Ezra 9:1-2. The fact that the priests and the Levites also intermarried\* was particularly upsetting as they were the leaders of the children of Israel and they were the ones to set the example of right and wrong.

When Ezra heard this news he was deeply upset and tore his tunic and his cloak and pulled his hair from his head and his beard\* and sat down and was appalled. All the people who feared the word of the Lord God of Israel gathered around Ezra and he was distressed over the unfaithfulness of the remnant of the children of Israel. God had already reduced their numbers because of their unfaithfulness and now they were threatening to bring on God’s anger again.

## NOTE:

*\*The fact that intermarriage was practiced unhindered in Israel throughout most of its history is clearly acknowledged in the Old Testament. Moses married a Cushite woman (Num. 12:1), Mahlon and Chilion Moabite wives (Ruth 1). Deuteronomy 21:10-14 permitted the marriage of women taken captive in war. David took among*

<sup>5</sup> Governor of Judah; Grandson of Jehoiachin, second to last king of Judah; Led the first band of Jews, numbering 42,360, who returned from the Babylonian Captivity.

<sup>6</sup> Jeshua, head of the priestly family of Jedaiah; helped organize the first group of exiles that returned to Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> [http://checkpointbible.org/survey/ezra\\_bible\\_survey.html](http://checkpointbible.org/survey/ezra_bible_survey.html)

<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sundayschool.html>

his wives a daughter of Geshur; Many Israelite marriages to foreign wives can, of course, be justified on the grounds that the foreigner became a proselyte (a convert) to Israel. But they were nevertheless tolerated and divorce was not required of them. Before the people of Israel entered the land of Canaan, they were warned not to intermarry with the inhabitants (Deut. 7:3). But they did intermarry in time and the situation became uncontrollable.

Many Christian young and old fall in love with unbelievers and consequently either fall away from their faith or have their zeal for the Lord greatly diluted.

\*The beard is held in high respect and greatly valued in the East and was never cut off but in mourning, or as a sign of slavery. This symbolized for Ezra, extreme personal pain felt because of the people's sin.

## LESSON:

### **Ezra 9:5-7 Repentance and the Results of Sin**

Ezra is before the Lord with his torn cloak and other signs of mourning until the evening sacrifice and then he rose and fell on his knees with his hands spread out to the Lord 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. 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" vv.6-7.

## POINT:

*Ezra recognized that sin is serious and that no one sins without affecting others. Ezra prayed and confessed the sins of his people while Jesus, our Great High Priest intercedes continually on our behalf.*

This chapter contains Ezra's prayer. A true mark of a man of God is that he mourns over sin, both his own sins and the sins of others.

## POINT:

Ezra's prayer is a model of confession. It has four elements:

1. *Confession acknowledges the absolute righteousness of God in all His dealings with us.*
2. *Confession submits to God's righteous dealings without complaint or excuse.*
3. *Confession agrees with God concerning His view of our sin.*
4. *Confession casts the sinner on God with their undeserved mercy, centering it on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.*

Ezra's prayer makes no petition, but rather, he implicitly casts himself and the nation on God's undeserved mercy, although he had not sinned in the way his people had. He demonstrates the need for a holy community around the rebuilt Temple.

### **Ezra 9:8-9 Giving Thanks for Mercy**

"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. 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" vv.8-9.

## NOTE:

\*A remnant is a small part that somehow has been left over from some larger substance, especially refers to those who survived a political or military situation. Spiritually, remnant also means those who repent and survive God's judgment; maintaining a relationship with God. Yet in this case, a major part even of the remnant had sinned. How tragic!

For a brief moment, the time given to this prayer, Ezra remembers God's past kindness to Israel in spite of their sins by praising God for His mercy and righteousness for leaving a remnant and not forsaking them to slavery. It was giving them a little life, liberty, and joy, even "a nail\* in His holy place"(KJV), a fixed settlement in the land of Judea, where they could hang their hopes and their future, refresh their spirits, cheer their souls, and give them light and gladness. It was like life from the dead for them, seeing after all that God had done to punish the people for their previous sins, and then deliver them from that punishment, you would think the people would know better than to go back into sin again. But look at God's mercy! And Ezra gives thanks for Mercy. Grace\* is given by God.

## NOTE:

\* Things were stored on nails (pegs) set up all around the room. If something was on its peg, it was safe and secure, stored properly and ready for use at the appropriate time.

\*Ezra says God punished them less than they deserve (V13). This is a description of grace. Grace leads God to offer us salvation and forgiveness despite the fact we deserve punishment. Hence, it is unmerited or undeserved favor.

## Ezra 9:10-11, 15 Acknowledging Guilt

Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing\* has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. Ezra offers no excuses and not even an explanation, just confesses the sins of the nation. *"But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands 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... 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.'"*

## NOTE:

\*This transgression had not been limited to just the ordinary citizens but had been committed by some of the community leaders, priests, and Levites, as well.

We as a society have down played the importance of sexual purity and fidelity. We overlook when they date, live with, and marry persons who do not know the Lord and have no interest or intention of knowing God; they just want to be with a "church woman" or a "church man." Remember, God has not overlooked this!

## POINT:

*The appeal must be made for mercy for the guilty, not as a favor to the deserving (or semi deserving). Ezra also did not claim special circumstances or did not tell God that their difficult environment made their present compromise understandable, or that all their other good works or faithfulness somehow excused their idolatry. He simply realized that no one can stand before God and reason their way out of this!*

## SUMMARY:

I was just reading in Ezra Chapter 3 about how the Jews went back to their homeland for the first time in over 140 years. They rebuilt the foundation of the temple. They had their first public worship service in years. And the people were weeping and shouting and praising God. And that's OK! That's what can happen when the Spirit of God is working in your life!

The remnant had traveled the 1000 mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. When they got there they spent about 5 months setting up and getting prepared to start the work. They had a time of preparation, a time of observation, and a time of motivation. Because of the extensive preparation where Ezra continually taught the people God's Word and lived it out in front of them, they were convicted of the sin in their midst. They observed that sin and were motivated to change. All of that led in one of the most powerful prayers of corporate confession in the Bible. Notice what didn't happen. Ezra didn't implement a bunch of rules and laws and programs to force the change on the people. That wasn't the type of approach he used. He first got on his face before God Almighty being so ashamed and prayed. Through prayer he confessed the sins of his people identifying with their needs saying "our iniquities." Through prayer he began to thank God for His grace and mercy for the remnant He had spared and then he acknowledged guilt. He ended prayer knowing God was righteous and no one could stand before God's presence with guilt. Ezra knew that repentance was needed for the people to get back in right standing with God. God in His mercy did stir the people's hearts to change getting them back on course (see Ezra 10:1-2).

## APPLICATION:

This passage, written about a problem 2,500 years ago, can teach us today how we should deal with the problems we face within God's holy community, the church, in our own 21st century to get us back on course. Often we cry out for justice when we feel abused and unfairly treated. In those moments we forget the reality of **our sin** and the righteous judgment we deserve.

Be careful, that you don't forget the price of forgiveness. Sin is a serious thing and we must handle it with care! Sin ordered God's Only Begotten Son to the cross. We mustn't forget that among the requirements for

God's forgiveness are repentance, confession and abandonment of our sins. Choose to intercede for God's people rather than to get into fleshly anger. Identify with their sin and confess it as your own. One way we can do this is by loving God with our words through prayer first.

Leaders need to lead the way in confession and model Godly repentance for those they lead. We must not get discouraged and quit, as the returning people did at first, but continue on boldly in the face of difficulties as they did later from the encouragement from the prophets.

Be determined to oppose apostasy in every form, make confession of your sins when you commit sin, be pleasing unto God and do His pleasure, and put away the evil from among the righteous. We are all in need of prayer to keep us on the right course. Stay prayerful!

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