

Ezra and the Horror of Sin

By the grace of God, the citizens of Judah had been released from captivity and returned to their homeland. The first chapter of Ezra describes how the Lord blessed Judah through the Persian king, Cyrus. Not only did Cyrus allow Judah to return home, he made sure that they had an abundance of provisions when they got back to the land of their fathers.

Chapters two through eight of the book of Ezra chronicle the trials and successes of Judah as they sought to rebuild their beloved city of Jerusalem and its temple. The influences of not only Ezra, but also the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are clearly seen as the people began turning back to God. Despite the advances of their detractors, the people of Judah were on the right track to righteous living – or so it seemed.

When we come to Ezra, chapter nine, we find that Judah's people and priests had intermingled with the heathen inhabitants who had taken up residence in the land while Judah was in foreign captivity. Ezra was appalled at this sin that God had strictly forbidden (Deuteronomy 7:3). He wrote, "And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice." (Ezra 9:3-4). The word translated "astonished" means, "to be stunned or horrified."

Ezra 9:5-6 depicts an act of humility and recognition of the burdensome weight of sin that all of us would do well to consider. The Bible says, "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, 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." Reading on through the rest of the chapter, we find Ezra recalling the sins of Judah's ancestors that led to captivity and the grace of God that freed them. He looked at where Judah had been in its earlier prosperity, where they had fallen in their sin, where they had come in God's deliverance and where they were at that particular moment. In short, they were back in sin. Ezra asked, "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments." (Ezra 9:10). Disgust and frustration filled Ezra's heart. God had done so much for them and yet His mercy was forgotten. What more could be said?

How can one help but be impressed with the depth of Ezra's awareness of the damning nature of sin? What had been done was not a trifling matter. It was a direct violation of God's Word. Recognition of the sin led to shame and sorrow. Ezra understood the consequences of sin. He was appalled and horrified by it. So great was his agony over sin that, according to Ezra 10:1, Ezra's mourning attracted the attention of those around him. His tears of sorrow eventually led to their tears of sorrow. Thankfully, a great period of repentance followed. The "strange" wives were put away, even in those homes where children had been born (Ezra 10:44). One man's grasp of the severity of sin led others to a similar understanding and ultimately produced a grand return to the path of righteousness.

In our day and time, sin often goes unacknowledged. Some who do take the time to acknowledge its existence simply write it off as inconsequential. "In the end, it won't matter whether or not you obeyed God," these suggest. "What will matter is your heart." As a result of this prevalent attitude, our society plunges deeper and deeper into depravity. It could be said of us today like it was said of the people of Jeremiah's day, "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush..." (Jeremiah 6:15). Blushing comes from being ashamed and embarrassed over one's actions. Ezra blushed in his recognition of the horrible sins of his countrymen. Jeremiah's contemporaries could not blush; neither can many of our fellow citizens.

There is nothing eternally pleasing or rewarding about sin. The only way we are going to turn ourselves from it is by understanding this and by developing an utter loathing for that which is in violation of God's will. Indeed, "our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens." Will we acknowledge this and repent?

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