

National Repentance Needed: Ezra's Example

National Prayer Day

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- Psalter 4: All
- Ezra 9
- Psalter 441:2-3
- Psalter 13:6-7
- America 1, 3

"I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice." -Ezra 9:4

Given the abandonment of scriptural norms in our nation, it is surprising, even humbling, that our government still calls us as citizens to a National Day of prayer and repentance. Sadly, however, few observe this annual day with earnest repentance and heartfelt prayer; still fewer realize that every day in our lawless times ought to be saturated with prayer and repentance. Who among us wrestles with how we are to live lives of prayer and repentance? Tonight we wish to consider with you how the godly priest Ezra wrestled for his nation. Our text you can find in Ezra 9:4b, only these words, "I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice." With God's help, our theme will be:

Ezra's Example For Us On National Prayer Day

1. His great astonishment because of Israel's sins
2. His penitent confession of Israel's sins
3. His acknowledgment of grace despite Israel's sins

I. His great astonishment because of Israel's sins

In Ezra 9, the priest Ezra serves as a remarkable example for us of how we ought to observe a National Prayer Day. Ezra lived during the last period of Israel's captivity in Babylon and the beginning of Israel's return from captivity. King Cyrus of Persia had given permission to the Jews to return to their native land, and had even provided money for the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. By the time Ezra came to renown as a counselor at the court of the new king of Persia, Artaxerxes, the temple had already been rebuilt and work was proceeding on rebuilding the

walls of Jerusalem, notwithstanding the opposition of many Samaritans.

Some of the God-fearing, however, had remained behind in Babylon to be a witness to the name of the Lord there. One of this remnant was Ezra. As a descendant of Aaron, Ezra was priest by birth. He was an educated man of considerable dignity and piety, who also served as prophet and scribe. The Bible says that he had prepared his heart to seek the Lord and sought to do good to Israel. His heart burned with holy zeal and genuine patriotism.

For some time, Ezra had desired to return to Israel to assist with the rebuilding of Jerusalem. One day he expressed this desire to the king. Artaxerxes not only granted his request, but also gave gold and silver to assist in buying materials for the walls of Jerusalem.

Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a number of his fellow Jews. When he saw the people worshipping in the rebuilt temple of Jerusalem, he rejoiced in Jehovah and was deeply humbled. The first thing he did was sacrifice sin-offerings to God — twelve bullocks, twelve he-goats, ninety-six rams, and seventy-seven lambs.

After Ezra had finished offering sacrifices, God-fearing rulers of the Jews approached him with sad news. They informed him that many of the Jews, priests, and rulers had married heathen women who lived in that area. The people of God, in direct violation of the express command of God (9:1), had mingled with the heathen — not only in trade and conversation, but also through intermarriage.

Ezra informs us of his reaction, "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" (Ezra 9:3). Ezra was grieved at heart to hear that a nation called after the name of Jehovah had so violated the law of God. He was grieved that a nation which had encountered so much tribulation had learned so little about the holiness and judgments of God. It was painful to realize that the long Babylonian captivity had not been sanctified to the majority. Moreover, even all the blessings God had recently bestowed had not brought them to a heartfelt desire and conviction to serve God and walk in His ways.

Ezra was greatly troubled and perplexed. He was astonished at the dishonor done to God and because of the sorrow the people were about to bring upon themselves.

Why should that holy God, who did not spare their fathers, spare them when they were committing the identical evil for which their fathers felt the heavy wrath of God and for which they were sent into captivity?

Dear friend, when we consider this once great nation of ours, must not we also sit down astonished?

We have a rich heritage and peculiar privileges. Among America's early settlers, the Pilgrims and Puritans were, for the most part, godly men and women. They immigrated to the New World, motivated to live according to Scripture and with freedom from government-controlled state churches. They yearned for freedom to worship without persecution. Before leaving ship the Pilgrim leaders compiled the well-known Mayflower Pact in which they confessed that their primary purpose in settling in this new land was "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith."

The Colonies developed to such a degree that many settlers were attracted to the New World's promise of riches and freedom from political oppression. The pervasive influence of the godly began to wane and government increasingly fell into the hands of those who were not moved by the Biblical principle of God's glory.

Matters moved from bad to worse in the 1700s, with the exception of seasons of remarkable revival, especially in the 1730s and 40s. The age of Enlightenment and the skepticism of the Frenchmen Voltaire and Rousseau helped to propagate the naturalism and deism that permeated England and spread to the Colonies. Political ambition, greed, and the natural result of loose, unbiblical living had a disastrous effect on the morals of western civilization.

Today we face the outgrowth of the Enlightenment, that is, pragmatic, atheistic humanism. Humanism has permeated our public square, our public schools, and our courtrooms; it destroys our inheritance and our moral character.

Morality has dropped to an all-time low in our nation. Uncleanness and licentiousness abound on every hand. Adultery has become largely socially acceptable providing there are two mutually agreeing parties. Perverted relationships are increasingly gaining "rights" with the government.

Passion for wealth, properly called materialism, is regarded as prudence. Materialism feeds our quest for pleasure and gratification. We endorse gambling and lotteries for pragmatic reasons. Covetousness, the mother of so much sin, is encouraged through high-pressure advertising. Pride and selfishness are promoted as virtues rather than vices. For the most part, we use God's generosity for ourselves rather than for His glory, God's curse pronounced against Israel in Malachi 3:9 applies equally to us, "Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation."

Violence has overwhelmed our civility. Crime threatens the personal safety of millions, Teenagers, even young children, imitate the murders they watch on television and in movies. Drugs are rampant nearly everywhere. Excessive drinking is regarded as an innocent pastime.

The baby-killing practice of abortion remains commonplace. Since 1973, when this nation legalized abortion, we have killed some thirty-five million babies, more than the population of the entire nation of Canada. The blood of unborn millions is on our hands.

Euthanasia, the deliberate taking of a human life, is proceeding apace. Sabbath desecration is the norm rather than the exception. The majority of our citizens no longer attend any church on a regular basis.

Neglect and contempt of God through swearing and taking His name in vain have become socially acceptable. We pretend to live as if there is no God, as if we have never fallen in Paradise, as if there is no approaching day of death and judgment. We live as if we are gods, daring to oppose the Lord's revealed will and Word.

Divorces on unbiblical grounds are a stench in God's nostrils, crippling our families and nation. Parental rights are increasingly denied.

Politicians appear more concerned about reelection than spiritual, moral, and fiscal responsibility. National debt is increasingly multiplied. Contrary to Scripture, national alliances are made with nations which do not fear God (Isa, 8:12; Ezra 9:14).

Worldliness — that spirit in which every man does that which is right in his own

eyes — is rampant. Self-centeredness, self-gratification, and self-love are the order of the day. Lust of the flesh, of the eyes, and of the pride of life is promoted. Worldly music, worldly partying, worldly friendship, worldly reading material abounds.

The power of the modern media, be it through television, rock music, or an illegitimate use of the VCR and computers, bodes ill for our future. Through the media, we worship at the shrine of professional organized sports without shame. We pay our sports-heroes more for six weeks of play than we do our president for a full term of service for four years.

Scriptural integrity and submission to authority are regarded as outdated and abhorrent, Prayer, church attendance, and religious duties are performed in a perfunctory manner, if at all. Parental Biblical instruction, family worship, private devotion, conscientious catechizing are all on the wane. Little esteem exists for the gospel and its privileges. The blessed Savior and the offered gospel are despised and slighted. Christ's blood is counted an unclean thing by millions.

Millions more rest in outward forms of worship or a shallow profession of Christianity. Millions build on the sands of false security, "easy believism," claiming forgiveness without repentance and salvation without ever becoming sinners before God. For the most part, Christianity has merged with materialism, humanism, and secularism. The result is that in America Christianity is 3000 miles wide, 1500 miles tall, but less than one inch deep.

We are backslidden. Iniquity abounds in all levels of society. The lives of the vast majority evidence little more than a pursuit after the carnal pleasures of this world. The corrective adversities God sends seem to profit us little; the blessings of prosperity only serve to move us further from our great Benefactor.

When neither blessing nor curse can do a nation any good, we must fear that we have been given over to ourselves as a nation. May not God say of us what He said of Ephraim, "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4:17)?

Sin is no longer sin because our spiritual foundations are gone. As Senator Hatfield noted, "We witness a country torn apart by division and lacking the spiritual foundations which would restore its vision and purpose," ,

We too must sit down astonished beside Ezra. Like him, we must be filled with dismay, with holy anger, with earnest repentance.

The Bible says that Ezra sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. Until that time, we do not even read that he prayed. It appeared that the case of those for whom he grieved was beyond hope and repair.

But at the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra received fresh hope, as we will see in our second thought when we consider: ·

II. Ezra's penitent confession of Israel's sins

The evening sacrifice was offered daily at 3:00p.m. on the brazen altar as an offering of atonement, pointing especially to the Messiah to come who would sacrifice Himself in the place of sinners on the cross of Calvary. In the evening of the world, in the fullness of time, the Son of God would sacrifice Himself as a lamb without spot or blemish to atone for sin and to reconcile sinners to Himself. Many Jews gathered together at that time for an hour of prayer, beseeching God that as their prayers ascended with the smoke of the evening sacrifice to the heavens, the Lord Himself might hear and answer their petitions for the sake of the Messiah.

Now when the evening sacrifice was offered on this particular day of grief, and Ezra saw how the lamb was offered in the place of sinners, he recovered sufficiently from his astonishment to fall upon his knees. He placed himself in the posture of a penitent petitioner begging for mercy, and spread out his hands to God. He reached out as one who desired to reach God, to touch the hem of His garment. With an eye to God as a God of mercy who desires to reconcile sinners unto Himself by means of His Son's sacrifice, Ezra confessed Israel's transgressions and pleaded for mercy and pardon.

Dear friend, this is what you need also. If the Holy Spirit may enter your life and convict you of sin, righteousness, and judgment, you too will be struck dumb and not be able to rise up from your astonishment so long as your eyes are not opened to God's great evening sacrifice, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself on Calvary as the divinely approved sacrifice for sinners. But if the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to "behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world,"

and you receive grace to repent before Him and believe on Him as your only hope and refuge of salvation, then you too will be able to rise up from your heaviness. Then you too will stretch out your hands to touch the hem of the garment of the Lamb of God. Then you will be enabled to look away from your misery and guilt to see that though there is great power in your sins to condemn you, there is even more power in the blood of Jesus to save you.

Ezra's bonds were broken; his lips were opened. By faith he made confession, as it were, with his hands upon the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:6-7). Two critical elements mark his confession. First, he took upon himself the guilt of Israel's sins. He spoke of "our iniquities" and "our trespass." He didn't lift himself above his people or nation, but realized that he was intimately involved in the nation's sins. And secondly, he was enabled to transfer at God's altar all those sins to Christ, placing them by faith upon the head of the evening sacrifice.

Only in this way can we make true confession before God. All Christless confession is ineffectual confession. Judas Iscariot also made confession, but without placing his hand by faith upon the head of the evening sacrifice. He had no eye for mercy, no heart for the Lamb of God. Without this faith in Christ, we cannot truly unburden ourselves before God and confess sin in His sight. Outside of Christ, God can only be a holy, consuming fire.

Oh, what a blessed, sweet reality confession is when it may be done at God's altar with an eye to Calvary's cross! Have you ever made confession in such a way? Have you ever experienced the sweetness of making confession at the foot of the cross of Calvary? Dear friend, there is no better place to be in all the earth than to confess sin at the feet of the merciful Savior.

There would be real hope for our nation and the entire world if true Christians throughout this land would come by faith to God's altar, confessing our national and personal sins with our hand upon the evening sacrifice. In fact, the opening verses of Ezra 10 teach us that this one man's blessed example reaped repentance and reformation throughout Jerusalem.

APPLICATION

III. Ezra's acknowledgment of grace despite Israel's sins

Our nation desperately needs to return to God. After all, what makes a country blessed? Geographical beauty? Military prowess? Unparalleled prosperity? Huge metropolises? Psalm 33:12 tells us: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance."

What does a country do with God and His Word? This is the critical question; everything else is secondary.

If this nation, yes, we ourselves, do not become Ezras before God -- repenting, pleading upon His Word, and fleeing to Christ — sin will ultimately reap divine destruction. The day or year of divine visitation shall come. God's patience will have an end. He has justly sworn that sinners and nations continuing in sin will not see His kingdom. He will not break His Word; His vengeance is unimpeachable.

We have squandered our rich heritage. We have multiplied our national debt, materially, morally, and spiritually. We have lost the greatest weapon of our armory, the weapon of prayer. We have turned our backs on God, His Word, and the fear of His Name. We have spoiled what our forebears have struggled to provide — a solid Biblical foundation on which to build a nation. Dark clouds righteously hang above us.

Our only hope lies in the intervening, sovereign grace of God's blessing the means He has called us to use. What are those means? What are we called to do?

First, we are called to seek the grace of repentance that Ezra received. Our nation needs neither more unbelievers nor more Pharisees. We need more men like Ezra. Blessed is the nation in whose midst are many who take the guilt of the sins of the nation upon themselves and who learn to bring that guilt to the cross of Calvary. If you desire to do a favor to your nation, church, family, and yourself, seek grace to bring the sins of nation, church, family, and yourself to the New Testament evening sacrifice, the cross of Calvary.

Second, we are called to pray earnestly for reformation and revival, to pray in the spirit of 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." With idolatry, perversion, and lawlessness flooding our land, let us earnestly

intercede and pray that conviction of sin, repentance, the fear and truth of God, and the centrality of Christ and His cross may be restored. Pray that men and women, teens and children, may be turned from vain pursuits and entertainments to the living Triune God. Pray for the saving work of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon many through the preaching and teaching of godly men qualified to lead churches in the way of truth. Pray for the revival of the historic Reformed faith, which insists that Christianity move beyond church walls to embrace distinctively Christian worldlife views and actions in all areas of life, including education, politics, and business.

Third, be more active in alerting our political leaders to the evils of our day. We must admonish ourselves, each other, and them, in the spirit of Isaiah 8:20, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

Finally, let us be active in our local neighborhoods and at work by speaking and embodying the truth in every area of our lives. Communicate with others as opportunities arise about the need for prayer, revival, repentance, and truth. Pass out Bibles, tracts, and other Biblical literature, bearing in mind the truth of an early American adage: "The pen is mightier than the sword." If you claim to be a Christian, be assured you are being carefully watched by many. Pray daily for grace to be salt in the earth and light on the hill.

Let us ask ourselves: Am I contributing to the swelling of our large debt of rational sin? Dear friend, we must all be born again and flee to God's proffered mercy in Jesus Christ. May God grant that we may all search and try our ways and turn to the Lord against whom we have so deeply rebelled. He is able and willing to make us genuine disciples of Jesus Christ --- disciples who will not be part of the problem but part of the solution.

"Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:6-7). AMEN.