

Ezra Confesses Israel's Sins

Series on Ezra

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Continuing our studies in the book of Ezra, let's turn again to chapter 9 and let's read together verses 5 and 6. "At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. And I said: 'O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.'"

Let's pray together.

Father, we praise You that You have given to us Your word, that You have taken such pains to secure for us these Scriptures. Lord, we esteem them as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. We pray that You would shine a light into our present darkness, Lord, that we would understand Your word tonight, that we would go on our way truly saying each of us, "It is well with my soul." Help us as we study Your word. We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let me begin by asking a question: have you ever felt disappointed by Christians? Have you ever felt that Christians have in some situation just let you down? Last year I read a blog by a Reformed theologian called Carl Trueman in which he recounted a visit to a local car dealership where he was in the process of buying a car and he was doing the paperwork and the salesman recognizing that he had a different accent, he asked him what had brought him to the United States. And so he told him, "Well, I'm teaching at seminary." "Really," the man said, "what a coincidence. This is a Christian company. The owner is a Christian. We have Christian values." At this point, Trueman says, "I almost walked out. A Christian company? Give me an honest Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, even tree-hugger, but when it comes to service and integrity in business, keep me away from Christians." Strange. Whatever would have made him say a thing like that? He goes on, "When I cast my eye over the 22 years of my time as a Christian, I realize I've just about seen it all done by those who name the name of Christ: homosexuality, adultery, stalking, theft, lies, threats, fraud, wife-beating, defamation, bullying, backbiting, greediness, heresy, and general all around loutishness. And as for the language of grace and forgiveness as an American talk show guest might say, don't even go there. Frankly, I've lost count of the times that such language has been used to excuse and then baptize

and sanctify substandard behavior moral and professional. The bottom line in my experience, Christians can be horrible people and basically they cannot be trusted to sell you chewing gum, let alone a used car."

So here is a man who clearly has been very disappointed by Christians, a man who has found them to be in many situations not the kind of people that they ought to have been. Well, I wonder if Ezra had the same experience as he came back to Jerusalem all of those years ago. I wonder if he was thinking those same kind of thoughts. I mean, these were the descendants of those faithful exiles who had come back some 80 years before that. What zeal. What devotion they had for the Lord. They had worked to rebuild the temple, they had seen the temple rebuilt. Surely, these were going to be a people who would be on fire for the Lord, people with a bright shining testimony before the pagans around them. Sadly, however, that wasn't the case and it wasn't long after Ezra and his group had come back into the land that Ezra discovers that all is not well among the people of God, that far from being witnesses to the pagans in Jerusalem, they have actually joined hands with the pagans in Jerusalem and are committing the kind of sins which shouldn't even be named amongst the people of God. So when Ezra hears this news, he's dismayed, he's heartbroken, he's distraught, he cannot believe what the people of God have come to. He sits down astonished. He pulls his hair. He plucks his beard and he then begins to pray, and then as John was saying earlier, this is one of the great prayers of the Bible. We're going to look at this, we're going to look at the whole chapter this evening. We're going to take in all 15 verses and it's full of instruction for us. I want us to consider three things: the sin, the shock and the supplication. The sin, the shock and the supplication.

Firstly, the sin, the sin that God's people have fallen into and it's something that Ezra hears about through the words of the leaders. Verse 1 again, "When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands.'" So here is Ezra, he and the second group of exiles are now back there in the land of Judah, they've made that journey back. We thought about this last time, 900 miles from Babylon. They have come with the king's blessing. They have come with all of the silver and gold. They've come with their children. They've made that enormous journey through wilderness terrain, through bandit country, and they made it safely. An amazing divinely blessed accomplishment, one of the miracle stories of their lives to make it so far. So they arrive, they rest for three days, they regain their strength and their energy and their composure, and then they go into the temple and then there is that offering the fourth day. Out comes the silver and gold. It's weighed, it's recorded very precisely, and then it's handed over as an offering to the Lord. They offer sacrifices, sin offerings to atone for their sins, and then a burnt offering as well to signify total consecration to the Lord. Then at the end of chapter 8, we find Ezra going on a journey, a tour of the land. He goes to see the satraps, the governors in different parts of the land to show them his letter of authorization that he has from the king granting him permission here to set up this legal, fiscal, liturgical framework for the Jews which is going to give them a tremendous amount of autonomy to rule themselves there in that part of the land.

So to begin with, it all just looks so very promising. Everything seems to be going so very well until we come into chapter 9 and what do we find here? Ezra receiving this very disturbing report. Verse 1, "The leaders came to me, saying, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites,'" and so on. So this, then, is the distressing news, it was the news that God's people, even the leaders among them, have once again fallen into that long-established pattern of sinfulness that they have known before intermarrying with the pagans, intermarrying with the idolaters, "the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites." These were people who had inhabited the land way back to the days of the conquest under Joshua. These actually were people who should have been driven out then in the days of the conquest, but they hadn't, they'd been allowed to remain and so now all of these years later you find that God's people are schmoozing up to them once again, getting very close to them, even intermarrying with them, and it's a shameful lamentable sin for God's people to commit. We don't know exactly why they were doing it, whether it was for economic reasons or perhaps commercial reasons or political reasons, they wanted to have great influence among that community. We don't know for sure but either way, whatever the reason, the Jews in Jerusalem had once again fallen into the sin of marrying amongst the people of other nations.

Now was this a racial issue? Is that what the problem here, that they shouldn't be marrying people of other races? No, it's not a racial issue. If you think back into the Old Testament, there are examples of other believers marrying individuals from other races. Moses, for example, married an Ethiopian. Boaz, that great man of God from Bethlehem, he married a Moabitess called Ruth, who herself eventually became an ancestress of the Messiah. So the issue wasn't one of race as such but rather the belief system of that individual who came from that race, whether they were willing to separate themselves from those pagan beliefs. Ruth, for example, do you remember her? She was willing to turn her back on the paganism of Moab. You know, they came to the crossroads, didn't they, and Naomi said, "I'm going back," and there was that decision. Orpah decided to stay in Moab but Ruth said, "No. No, wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." So she embraced the God of Israel. She put herself under the shadow of his wings and so where we can see actually as we go through the book of Ruth, we see the beautiful flowering and blossoming of Ruth's faith, don't we? In fact, it's her piety and her godliness that really draws Boaz to her and he realizes that if he marries a woman like this with her zeal and her love for the Lord, this is actually going to help his faith, this is going to draw him nearer and nearer to the Lord.

So that, then, was the key issue. Marrying a person of another race was not a problem in itself, it was whether they were willing to forsake the pagan religion of that race, and if they weren't, then it was something that was strictly forbidden. There are a number of texts that we can point out. I'm just going to give you a couple of them. Deuteronomy 7, the words of Moses. "When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites,

seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods." So if you start joining yourselves up with them, they're going to lead you astray, they're going to start encouraging you to worship other gods.

One other text, Exodus 34, the same kind of thing. "Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods." So if you start joining up with them, it isn't going to be long before you're worshiping their gods as well.

Think about Solomon. The same thing happened to him, Solomon began to gather to himself many many wives, many of whom worshiped other gods and eventually it says, 1 Kings 11, it turned his heart away as well. That's the danger, isn't it? You think you're going to help them, you may think you're going to be the one who draws them nearer to the Lord. But, no, more often than not they will be the one who leads you away.

I think I've told you this story before about Spurgeon. It's quite a helpful one in this setting. There was a young lady in Spurgeon's church and she came to him one day and told him that she was courting a man and planned to marry him. And Spurgeon said, "Oh, is he a Christian like yourself?" "No," she said, "but I'm hoping to lead him to the Lord." And he said, "Oh, really. Just come into my office." And they went to the office and he made her stand up on the desk and he put out his hand and said, "You see if you can pull me up." And so the girl tried as hard as she could and she couldn't. He said, "Try harder." And she was trying to pull him up and in the end he said, "Let me see if I can pull you down." So he just gave her a little tug with his hand and she lost her balance and she jumped down onto the floor and she learned the lesson which Spurgeon then explained to her. It's much easier to pull someone down than it is to pull them up, and so it will be for us. It will be much easier for the unbeliever to pull you down than for you to pull them up.

You imagine a situation and imagine a young girl, she's gone off to college and she meets a guy and maybe he's kind of good-looking and he's funny and he's easy-going, and she's drawn to him, she's attracted to him, she finds he's relaxed and maybe much easier to get on with than some Christian boys that she knows. But he doesn't go to church. He doesn't read the Bible. He's not interested in the things of God. Yeah, he seems to be a nice guy and she spends more and more time with him, finds an affection developing for him, begins to think, "Well, surely, God wouldn't be against such a nice person like this.

Surely, God would never judge someone like this, wouldn't send someone like this to hell, would He?" And gradually it's not long before the whole way that she thinks about God and about the gospel and about the teachings of the Bible is beginning to change, and that kind of thing can happen in many different ways.

That's why the Bible in many places warns us against this, avoided that snare of being unequally yoked. 2 Corinthians 6, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. Therefore 'Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord.'" Over and over again the Bible tells us this, doesn't it, don't be unequally yoked. Don't be harnessed up to unbelievers. Come out from them and be separate.

Now does that mean to say that we are not to have any friendships with unbelievers? Does that mean to say we've got to put on our camel-hair cassocks and go live in a monastery out in the woods? No, of course not. Jesus' prayer was, wasn't, not that God would take us out of this world but that he would keep us from the evil one. Now we are to be in the world, we are to have many many friendships with unbelievers and be looking for opportunities to strike up those kind of friendships, but that doesn't mean to say at the same time they have to become your bosom buddies, your closest companions and confidantes, because if you allow that to happen, then that's exactly what will happen, the corrosive influence of their belief will begin to overpower the very positive influence of your own and the salt will lose its savor, our testimony will lose its edge. We'll find that there's just no distinction between us anymore, just as happened in Judah. They couldn't be distinctive from the nations. From the top to the bottom, the priests right down to the people, there was just no difference, and that can happen to us. Not just to the young people but all of us. We can end up becoming Christianized worldlings. That can happen, can't it? We can become like Old Testament Israel, playing the harlot.

You know, that's not just Old Testament language, that's New Testament language as well, isn't it? James 4, "[You] Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." That's in the New Testament. 1 John 2, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." The doctrine of separation, it applies to us today, keeping ourselves away from those unions and those associations which will draw us away from the Lord. We can learn that here in the book of Ezra.

That's the first point, that's the sin. Let's now consider, secondly, the shock, the shock that Ezra experiences as he hears this news. Verse 3, "when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished." Ezra then, he can hardly believe it. This is devastating news for him. These are the people who have come back from Babylon. They've made a home for themselves in Jerusalem, the city of God. They, their parents and their grandparents had seen the temple rebuilt. They have known the good hand of the Lord upon them. They've

been signally blessed of the Lord and so many ways and yet they have rejected his commandment. They flatly rejected God's commandment. And as Ezra comes back and he's given news of this, this is devastating, it's heartbreaking. The report that God's people once more have broken covenant with the Lord, that they have turned their back on his word once more, they've joined themselves up with idol worshipers once again. Even the priests, even the Levites, even the temple workers right there in the heart of the city of God, there is this terrible corruption and declension. For Ezra the scribe, it's heartbreaking, it's devastating for him. He's in trauma here. This is a meltdown moment for Ezra. He tears his robe, he pulls out his hair, he plucks his beard. It's a very dramatic graphic demonstration of grief. The beard in those days, it was a sign of a man's maturity, his wisdom, his esteem. You know, for someone to remove a man's beard or him to pluck it out, that was a sign of great humiliation and shame and deep deep mourning.

And that's what he does, he pulls out the hair from his own beard and he sits down and he is astonished, and that word "astonished," it means "appalled." He's appalled and astonished. It's a horrified state of disbelief. He can hardly get his head around this, that the people of God would come to this, they would so blatantly defy the word of God in light of their own history. It wasn't very long that they'd been in Babylon. It was this kind of thing that got them into Babylon in the first place and here they are not many years on and they're doing exactly the same thing again. Don't they learn? And it's like, you know, you have a child and maybe a child comes out of the correction room and they're smarting a little bit for their disobedience, and then they go and they do exactly the same thing again and you say to them, "Well, didn't you learn? Didn't the punishment make any difference? Do you really want to go through all of this again?" And this is the way that Ezra thinks. The people have only just got back into the land, they've only just been restored to the land and if they carry on like this, it's going to happen again.

So when Ezra thinks about this, the evil of this, the seriousness, the implications of all of this, he cannot help but mourn and tear his clothes and pull his hair and sit down. He's astonished. "Ah," someone says, "come on, Ezra, bit over-the-top, isn't it? You know, all this robe tearing and beard clucking stuff, a bit extreme, isn't it?" That's perhaps the way some people might think in those days, maybe even today, certainly today. You know, how few people today would react like that to sin? How few people in our own generation have that kind of response to sin? Because we do, don't we, live in an age where people generally have very light views of sin, even if they use the word at all. Many people don't even have a concept of sin anymore, they would deny the notion that certain types of behavior actually violates the moral commandments of God. No, no, away with such a notion. We live in an age when every man really does do that which is right in his own eyes so there's no guilt or shame attached to individuals in many situations, is it? No, it's not the individual's fault, it's his parents' fault, or it's the government's fault, isn't it, for making him live in that rundown housing project. Or it's the chemicals, the lack of chemicals in his brain. Or maybe it's a surplus of additives in his food, that's what makes him do this. No, there is no sin.

We've done away with the whole notion of sin or, if we haven't, then we kind of dress it up in fancy terms, don't we? A man, he, you know, leaves his wife and goes off and has a

number of flings with other women, that man's not an adulterer, no, he's just a playboy. Or a man who spends all of the family income on drink, that man's not a drunkard, no, he's just a good time Charlie. Or a man who engages in physical relations with another man, doing that which is unseemly, the Bible says. Well, no, he's not a homosexual, he's just being gay. Do you see how acts of sin have been dressed up in fancy clothes and how they've been ethically airbrushed and photoshopped by our generation to make them seem so much more acceptable? That's what's happening in our generation and that's the reason why Ezra's reaction here can seem so very striking, it's because we ourselves have become dulled and desensitized to sin.

We don't see it the way a man like Ezra did, or even, you know, some of our forefathers, the way they viewed sin. You know, the Puritans used to use a phrase like the exceeding sinfulness of sin, or the heinousness of sin, the treason of sin. They saw sin for what it was, it was rebellion, defiance, and outright attack upon the holiness and the sovereignty of God. And because of that, they mourned over it, they grieved over it, they deeply sorrowed over sin which is the right reaction, isn't it? Any other reaction on the part of the Christian is a defective, deficient response to sin. You imagine a doctor who receives his patient's cancer diagnosis and chuckles to himself as he reads it. Or a policeman who arrives at the scene of a crime, it's the home of a senior citizen, it's been broken into, vandalized, their life savings have been stolen and the policeman comes and goes, "Ha, those kids, eh? Boys will be boys, won't they?" What kind of response is that? It's woefully defective, woefully inappropriate response, and so it would be for us. If we see the open, outright, blatant sins of others or even ourselves and we don't mourn, we don't grieve, we don't deeply sorrow for sin. Is that how we react? Do you have that kind of response where you hear, for example, maybe, I don't know, of somebody falling into the sin of adultery, do we mourn over that, do we feel heaviness of heart over that, or do our ears begin to tingle, do we begin to salivate, "Oh, come on, dish the dirt. Tell me all of the juicy details." Or perhaps there's a family and their son or their daughter has gone completely off the rails, become a total prodigal, how do we react, are we crestfallen, are we broken, do we ache for that family, or is there a slight thrill of satisfaction that it's their son or it's their daughter and not ours? This is a way that we can measure if we have the same kind of spiritual compass as a man like Ezra. Do we have the same sensitivity of conscience as Ezra.

Or think about national sins. You know, this was national sins that Ezra was mourning over. Do we react in the same way? I mean, think about it, this country, the United States, in some ways it's similar to the situation you have here. You have here a people who have been greatly blessed of God, people with a wonderful heritage, people brought into the land and people who have known the hand of God upon them, blessed in so many many ways and yet they have turned, they have departed from the ways of the Lord. Isn't that really what's happened to this land? You know, think about your history. Thanksgiving coming up this week, you know, cast your mind back, 1620, William Bradford and Myles Standish and William Brewster, all these great men, and then the New England Puritans who came after, mighty men of God, so greatly used to establish a God-fearing foundation for this nation. What blessing has come upon the United States as a result and yet how far the nation has drifted and it continues to drift even today. How little concern

or respect there is for God's word and for his law. How men and women today defiantly provoke him to his face, flaunting perverted lifestyles. The burgeoning support that there is now for same-sex marriage legislation. Systematic attempts to remove the Bible from many spheres of public life. How his name is blasphemed. You know those three letters OMG, that's part of the national vocabulary now, isn't it, taking the Lord's name in vain. Then, of course, you think about abortion, the killing of babies. I came across a statistic recently that over the past 35 years 50 million babies have been murdered in this country, 50 million, that's almost the population of the United Kingdom in the past 35 years. I don't mean to depress you with these statistics but, you know, think about it in this context, given the history of this great nation, how far we have drifted. Shouldn't something like that make us want to mourn? Shouldn't it make us want to tear our clothes and pull out our hair? Shouldn't we want to sit down astonished? Well, maybe it doesn't, maybe we're just so used to it now we don't feel it anymore. That can happen, can't it?

Some years ago when I lived in London, it was the late 1990s, I used to work there in an office in central London. Friday evenings we'd go to a Christian meeting, it was called an assembly of Christians, and we met in Orange Street, a little chapel in the heart of London. And what would happen on Friday nights, they would have a preacher, one of the better preachers in the country would come down and preach for us just on Friday evening. So I remember going along, I came out of work, I've got out of the underground at Charing Cross, and was going up walking through Trafalgar Square towards Orange Street, and as I walked through there, I saw a man with a dark coat sitting on a bench, and as I got nearer, I noticed it was actually the preacher for the evening. It was a man called John Brentnall, a wonderful preacher in the UK. As I got nearer, I saw it was him and so I thought I'd go and say hello to him, and as I got closer, I could see that he was crying and I went up to him and I said, "Are you all right?" And he was a little bit taken aback. He didn't expect to see me, then he explained what had happened. He had come down from Derbyshire on the train and he hadn't been to London for many many years, and he came on the underground, he came out and he saw the billboards, the lewdness of the images, the way that some of the people were living, the drunkenness and the things that went on in central London, and he was just overwhelmed by it and he sat down and it made him want to weep.

And I was just very struck by that. That was 10 years ago now and, you know, I haven't forgotten it because it was a rebuke to me. You know, I'd lived in London for five years and it didn't make any difference to me, I was so used to it. But here was this man of God who came in there, he saw it and he was astonished. You know, he sat down and was astonished and he began to weep. That's the response of a godly man, "Rivers of tears flow from my eyes because they keep not thy law." That's the way Ezra responded. William Green, one of the Puritans, says the eye is for two things, the sight and for tears. If we see God dishonored, presently our eyes should be filled with tears. So that was Ezra. When he hears of this sin, he cannot help but mourn.

Let's now consider our third point. We thought about the sin, the shock, let's consider the supplication. Verse 5, "At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my

God." So Ezra has heard this report, he's astonished, he's shocked, he's grieved, he's moved to pray at the evening sacrifice, a time when sacrifices for sin were made and the blood of an animal was shed. And it's at this time that Ezra takes himself to prayer and he falls down and he pleads before the Lord. There's a physical aspect to this. He goes down on his knees, he holds out his hands. It's a sign of imploring and of abasement and desperation.

There is also a verbal aspect to this, a verbal acknowledgment of guilt in verse 6, "for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens." So it's gone over our heads. It's like a rising floodwater, like a surging tide which comes and sweeps everything away. You think back to those images we saw from Japan earlier this year and the tsunami, and the force of those waters, how they rise higher and higher, they come up to the waist and then up to the chest, and then they go over people's heads and they are swept away. And that's what happened in Judah, their sins having gone unchecked have risen higher and higher and eventually they did, they led to them being swept away. That's what happened in their history.

Look at verse 7, "for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day." "Lord, this is what our sins have done to us in the past. They have led to us being taken away. Lord, if You don't intervene now, Lord, if You don't lift us up above these sins, that's what's going to happen again. We'll be swept away by Your judgments." We are guilty, he says, these are our transgressions. In fact, you know, it's interesting, Ezra here makes them his transgressions as well, doesn't he? He's not guilty of them all personally, he hasn't done the same things as many of these people, but he implicates himself. He says there at the beginning, doesn't he, "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. It's ours," he says. "It's not just theirs, it's not just those people as rotten, backsliding, carnal, worldly minded exiles of yours. No, it's me. I am part of the problem," he says. "These are our sins. I am ashamed. I am guilty. I'm at fault here." Ezra is a man who knows there is guilt lurking in his own heart. Not that he's done the things that some of these others have done but he knows the darkness, the wickedness that lurks within his own breast like Jonathan Edwards who once said, "When I look into my own heart and take a view of my own wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell itself." That's the way that Ezra feels about his own heart, so when he confesses the guilt here, he numbers himself among the transgressors. He said, "It's me. I'm part of the problem here."

Quite a few years ago in England, the Times newspaper, they wanted to run a series of articles entitled "What's wrong with the world?" So they commissioned a number of well-known authors and writers to submit their pieces and they asked G. K. Chesterton, he was quite a well-known Christian writer at the time, to submit a piece, "What's wrong with the world?" And he wrote in his letter, just two words, he put, "Dear Sirs, I am. Yours sincerely, G. K. Chesterton." That's the response of a godly man, isn't it, the acknowledgment of guilt. We don't come to the Lord like that man who went into the temple and said, "Lord, I thank You that I'm not like other men." No, we come like the

publican, don't we, and we beat our breast and we don't even dare as much as look up to heaven and we say, "God, be merciful to me a sinner. It's me. I'm part of the problem." Isaiah said, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips! It's me. It's me. I am part of the problem here."

That's one aspect of prayer, isn't it? We begin by confessing guilt. There are a couple of other aspects I want us to see here as well. There's guilt but, secondly, also there's grace. Look at verse 8. The pastor pointed this out to us, didn't he? Verse 8, grace, "And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage." So in the midst of the heaviness and the despair, all of a sudden there is this breakthrough of grace. The grace of God is seen in his merciful dealings with his people in bringing them back, bringing a remnant. You see that word a couple of times there, he brings a remnant back. He gives them a peg in this holy place. That's an unusual phrase, the word "peg." It's actually a word that because most often with regard to a tent peg which is hammered into the ground, its stability and security and encourage and it's in the holy place. Probably this is referring to the temple. God has rebuilt the temple for them. They have stability now. They have security in a very turbulent time. They have this peg.

And then also there is the grace of encouragement. Verse 8, that our God may give light to our eyes and give us a little reviving in our bondage. He has brightened their eyes. He has encouraged them by freeing them from slavery and bringing them back into the land. Verse 9, "For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem."

So this is the abounding grace of God towards his people. Despite their own iniquities and backslidings, they have been the recipients of mercy after mercy. That has been God's response and Ezra reflects it in his own prayer. One commentator says the immensity of guilt in verses 6 and 7 is met by the majesty of grace in verses 8 and 9. So they deserved nothing from him, they deserved just wrath and condemnation from him, but in return they received grace. For their failings they received his faithfulness. The immensity of their guilt was met by the majesty of his grace and that's something that we see throughout the Bible, the testimony of so many of God's people in the Scriptures. Abraham. Jacob. Moses. David. Jonah. All of these men at one time or another did shameful despicable things and yet God didn't reject them, God didn't abandon them, he forgave them and he even used them to do wondrous things in his service. Amazing grace.

Now you think about John Newton in this context, what privileges he had. As a young man, he was brought up by a godly mother who taught him the Scriptures, taught him to pray, taught him the things of God, and yet he despised them. He wanted to get free. He wanted to go out into the world and join hands with the world. And that's what he did, he became a slave trader, a very brutal blasphemous one, at that. And he himself was even surprised sometimes at how bad he had become. His iniquities had gone over his head.

But then came that night, March 10, 1748, when the Lord delivered him out of deep waters quite literally when he was caught in that violent storm. He felt sure he was going to die and all his sins came before him and he remembered his mother and the prayer that she had taught him and he began to pray and the Lord heard and answered his prayer and saved him. But not only that, used him wonderfully in his service. The great hymn writer, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

This is the grace that Ezra is speaking of here in this prayer. They have heaped up their guilt but God has demonstrated his grace. But then there's a final element to this prayer: guilt, grace, thirdly, their gall. It's an unusual word, it means, it has a range of meanings but it means insolence, effrontery, audacity. You had the gall to do something like that? Their gall, the people would carry on the way they have in view of what God is done and Ezra describes it in verses 10 through 13. Let me just read some parts of that. "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments," verse 13, "And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations?" Ezra's saying, "Look, we've been given such mercy, God has been so very very good. We were thrown out of our land for our sin the first time but now He's brought us back and He's given us the temple, and He's given us silver and gold, and He's turned the hearts of successive kings towards us like watercourses. We have been given this glorious second chance and here we are provoking Him to wrath once again, here we are throwing it all back in His face once again. Here we are, we're at it again." That's how one of the modern translations puts it. The Message Bible puts it this way, "On top of all that we've already suffered because of our evil ways and accumulated guilt, even though you, dear God, punished us far less than we deserved and even went ahead and gave us this present escape, yet here we are at it again, breaking your commandments by intermarrying with the people who practice all these obscenities." That pretty well sums it up, doesn't it? Here we are, we're at it again. No sooner had they turned from that sin and seemingly forsaken that sin, then they're at it again.

You imagine a man who he's unfaithful to his wife, he cheats on his wife behind her back, and she is devastated. She spends nights weeping and searching her heart and eventually, she loves that man so much she forgives him and she decides she wants to take him back. But then the very next day she comes home and she finds he's in his study, he's on one of those internet dating sites. The very next day he's at it again in view of all that's happened, in view of the forgiveness and the compassion, the mercy that he's received, he's at it again. And this is the kind of thing that Ezra is lamenting in his prayer. He can hardly believe it. "There are no words," he says, "what can we say, O Lord? I don't know what to say. We're at it again."

But isn't that something, you know, just to kind of pull this down to ourselves now, isn't that something that, you know, in our own lives we have to confess as well? Our own audacity? Our own gall? In spite of the fact that God has been so continually good to us,

he's rescued us time and time again, delivered us, blessed us in countless myriad ways, and yet here I am, I'm at it again. That same sin that I did yesterday, I confessed and said I would never do that again and now here I am the next day, I'm at it again. Isn't that the battle that even today as new covenant believers we wrestle with, the battle today that causes us, as it were, to pull out our hair and tear our garments? Isn't that the kind of struggle that Paul talks about in Romans 7, that sort of war that's going on within himself? "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice. But what I hate, that I do. For the good that I will to do, I do not do but the evil I will not to do, that I do." In fact, he says, "There's a law in my members warring against the law of my mind, bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death." There is this war going on within him, "The good I would do, that I don't and that which I wouldn't do, that I do. Wretched man! I'm at it again."

What's the answer? He gives us the answer, doesn't he? "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." He is the answer. He is the answer to the soul's struggle and the soul's turmoil. It's faith in him, in Jesus Christ. He is the one who can give us the upper hand. He can give us victory over those besetting sins.

Now it did Ezra have a view of that? Did Ezra have a knowledge of that Redeemer? Yes, he did. Look at this passage. When was it that Ezra brought this prayer before the Lord? When was it that he unburdened himself of his sin and the people's sins before the Lord? Verse 5 says it was at the time of the evening sacrifice so that would have been at three in the afternoon when the Jews would gather together, they would come to the brazen altar, they would lay their hands upon the sacrificial beast, the blood of reconciliation would be shed, they would confess their sins and they would look to Messiah who would come one day and pay for those sins. This is the one that Ezra was looking to. That was the sacrifice that Ezra was looking to, the sacrifice of Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "appeared once for all at the end of the age." The evening of the world, he appeared, "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Jesus, that Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, that's the place where we're to go with our transgressions, that's the place where we're to go with our sins and our continual backsliding. We take them to the cross. "I lay my hand on Jesus, the spotless Lamb who died. He bears them all and frees me, from all my shame and pride." Bring them to the cross. Bring them to the altar, the golden altar of Calvary. Lay them there. Leave them there and ask him for a fresh measure of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit that he earned for us in order to give us victory over our sins.

"My sins, my sins, my Savior, they take such hold on me. I am not able to look up, save only Christ on thee. In thee is all forgiveness, in thee abundant grace. My shadow and my sunshine, the brightness of thy face." That's the place to bring our sins, isn't it, to lay them down at the feet of the Lord Jesus. Bring them to him and ask him that he would give us that graced so that we might live the kind of lives that redeemed people ought to live.

Let's now sing together as we conclude. Let's turn to our supplements and sing together number 34. This was the rejoicing of Ezra and those people as they came at the time of

the evening sacrifice, rejoicing in the truth that there is a Redeemer. "Jesus, God's own Son precious Lamb of God Messiah, holy one." Let's stand together and sing.