

Sin in the Camp

Text: Ezra 9:1-5

Introduction:

1. Ezra 9 and 10 form a new section in the Book and concern the exposing of grievous sin amongst the remnant and Ezra's godly response to it. We could summarize Ezra's godly response to sin in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. The Book of Ezra abruptly closes after this incident. "The emphasis is placed by the Holy Spirit on the most important issue at that time, the moral condition of the people of God, because "holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, for ever" (Ps. 93:5)." (M.K. Hall)
3. The opening verses of chapter 9 give us the context and the details of the problem which we will consider under three headings.

I. THE REVEALING OF THE PEOPLE'S SIN (VS. 1A)

God in His mercy, allows the sin of the people to be exposed.

A. The Season of the Revelation – "Now when these things were done"

1. The sin amongst God's people was exposed right after some significant victories and blessings. What a grief it must have been for Ezra to have to deal with this after the highpoints described in the previous two chapters. But he was God's man raised up for that hour which means confronting the problems as well as enjoying the victories.
2. This is the reality of the Christian life and ministry. There are victories and high points then there are battles that must be fought and won. The grapes and the giants come together!

B. The Source of the Revelation – "the princes came to me saying"

1. The "princes" of the nation were the ones who brought the report to Ezra. This was entirely appropriate as Ezra was one of the main spiritual leaders in the nation whom God had raised up for this time.
2. In a similar fashion, the house of Chloe brought a report to Paul concerning the divisions in the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11), a report Paul accepted as reliable and acted upon.
3. Within the local church context, it is right and appropriate that the leaders (pastors/overseers) be made aware of problems and issues as they arise within the assembly.

C. The Stimulation of the Revelation

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1. Evidently this sin was quite widespread amongst the people of God and had been going on for some time before Ezra arrived. What prompted the princes to bring it to Ezra's attention?
2. Note that Ezra and his company arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). On the twentieth day of the ninth month the men of Judah and Benjamin came together to Jerusalem to deal with this matter (10:9). Thus, four and a half months went by until this problem came to light.
3. It is reasonable to conclude that during this time Ezra had been teaching "in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ez. 7:10) and the Word of God had brought conviction to the heart and awakened the consciences of the princes (Ez. 9:1). This represented real humility on the part of the princes as they were among the chief offenders in this matter (Vs. 2b).
4. As sad as the news was, it was a good thing that the sin had been exposed. If there was to be ongoing revival and blessing amongst the returned remnant, then sin would need to be confessed and forsaken.

II. THE REPORT OF THE PEOPLE'S SIN (VS. 1B-2)

Consider the specifics of the people's sin as reported by the princes. We note that there was:

A. A Separation Problem (Vs. 1b)

1. The failure of no separation – "have not separated themselves from the people of the lands".
 - a. Clearly there had been a breakdown in their separation as earlier under the leadership of Zerubbabel it is noted at the dedication of the temple "And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had **separated themselves unto** them **from** the filthiness of the heathen of the land, **to seek the LORD** God of Israel, did eat," (Ezra 6:21) This was approximately 58 years before Ezra came to Jerusalem so things had deteriorated over that time. In disobedience to the many clear commands of the Old Testament concerning separation, the people of God had ceased maintaining separation from the heathen.
 - b. "This failure demonstrates the ever-prevailing character of human nature. Whatever the spiritual blessing that has been enjoyed, there is nevertheless always the danger that if the flesh and the world are allowed an entrance into the believer's heart there can be shameful failure." (M.K. Hall)
 - c. M.F. Unger has commented on this verse: "That the returned remnant should so grossly violate their pilgrim character after so

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- brief a time following their gracious and remarkable deliverance from Babylon...shows the deceitfulness of the human heart.”
- d. The absence of separation in the people of God is as great a failure in our day as it was in Ezra’s day. There is failure in:
 - i. Separation from the world – there is very little personal separation from the world in the lives of Christians today and very little separation from the world in churches. It is hard to tell the difference between the world and many churches. They sound, look and behave like the world with a few Christian trappings on the outside.
 - ii. Ecclesiastical separation – by ecclesiastical separation we refer to separation from compromise, error, false doctrine, false brethren and even genuine believers who are walking in disobedience to God’s Word. We are living in an ecumenical age where most of the professing church, including those who claim to believe the Gospel, have renounced separatism and there is little to no separation from those who are in error. In the name of “love, unity and the so-called cause of the Gospel”, the walls of separation have been torn down. In reality the result has been catastrophic for the cause of the truth and has produced the opposite of what was claimed.
 - iii. Note: One of the hallmarks of the Fundamental, Independent Baptist movement in its early days was its separation from error. This was not an isolationist position as soul-winning and missions was also a major emphasis and practice. This separatist stance has collapsed over the past couple of decades at an alarming rate. While a good number of IFB’s may still pay some lip service to separation, in reality most have embraced a soft form of separatism where sin and error is condemned in generalities (in theory) but in practice there is little to no real stand being taken or drawing of sharp, clear lines of separation.
 2. The fruit of no separation – “doing according to their abominations”. Ezra lists eight pagan nations with which the people of God had intermingled – the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.
 - a. The break down in separation lead to **accepting** the abominations of the heathen. The word ‘abomination’ is “an awesome word, and its major use is to denote anything that is of intense offence to God” (M.K. Hall) Lowering the walls of separation leads to a toleration of error which in turn leads to an acceptance of error. This is exactly what we are seeing across

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- Christendom today with widespread tolerance, acceptance and even the promotion of things the Bible calls an abomination. T
- b. The break down in separation lead to **adopting** the abominations of the heathen. The influence only moves in one direction when you violate Biblical principles of separation from sin and error. Instead of you influencing them, they influence you! The influence is a one-way street and it's always the wrong direction. This is significant as reason that is most often put forward for rejecting separation is "in order to have an influence from within". In reality, it is the separated, salt and light believer who will be used of God to have a real impact for good and godliness.

B. A Spouse Problem (Vs. 2)

Here we get to the root cause of the breakdown in separation; some of God's people had married heathen wives and thereby had been influenced to adopt heathen practices. Apart from salvation, there is no closer tie on earth than the marriage bond and the influence spouses have on one another is powerful for good or evil.

1. The problem with these marriages (Vs. 2a)
 - a. They were unequal yokes which were forbidden the people of God in Israel and which are still forbidden the people of God in the New Testament age. 2 Cor. 6:14 "**Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers:** for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"
 - b. Note: The Bible does not condemn so called "interracial marriage". There is only one race, the human race (Acts 17:26) and differences are cultural, not racial. There are examples of marriages between Jews and Gentiles in the Old Testament that were blessed of God. E.g., Boaz and Ruth (a Moabites), Salmon and Rahab (the harlot) and Moses and an Ethiopian woman. The key point in all of these marriages was the fact these ladies clearly embraced and One True God of Israel.
 - c. They jeopardized the "holy seed". Not only would the children of these marriages be affected but the Messianic line was threatened.
 - d. In some cases, these marriages likely involved divorcing one's Jewish wife in favour of a heathen one. See Malachi 2 and the description of what was happening in Nehemiah's day, a few decades after Ezra.
2. The principal offenders with these marriages (Vs. 2b)
 - a. Sadly, the chief offenders were the leaders in the nation. There was sin in the leadership!

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- b. The statement, “Everything rises and falls with leadership”, while not a Scripture quotation, does seem to express a lot of truth. If the leaders of the nation had failed in the area of godly separation, then it would only be natural for the people to follow.

III. THE RESPONSE TO THE PEOPLE’S SIN (VS. 3-5)

Thank God Ezra had a godly response to this heart-breaking revelation. This says a lot about the kind of leader Ezra was. His response was twofold:

A. Contrition (Vs. 3-4)

1. The expression of his contrition.
 - a. He was brokenhearted (Vs. 3a)

His grief and sorrow over the sin of the people is portrayed in his actions:

 - i. He rent his garment and mantle.
 - ii. He plucked out hair from his head and beard.
 - iii. All of these actions were expressions of deep grief. Sadly, today sin doesn’t seem to grieve God’s people much anymore!
 - b. He was dumbfounded (Vs. 3b)
 - i. Ezra uses the word ‘astounded’ twice to describe how he felt at that time (Vs. 3b, 4b). The word in Old English means to be stunned, dazed and shocked.
 - ii. This is a healthy response to sin from a man of God who is filled with the Word of God (Ez. 7:10). His heart and conscience had been sharpened by the truth of God’s Word, making him sensitive to sin.
 - iii. The problem today is that all too often we have become desensitized to sin. We are no longer shocked and disturbed by sin.
2. The effect of his contrition (Vs. 4)
 - a. Ezra’s godly response to the scandal had an impact and an influence on others under his leadership.
 - b. Notice that it was not all the people who responded soberly to this situation but specifically the people who had a high and holy reverence for the Word of God – “everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel”.
 - c. Isaiah 66:2 “For all those *things* hath mine hand made, and all those *things* have been, saith the LORD: **but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.**”
 - d. God had exalted His Word above His very name. Psalm 138:2 “I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy

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lovingkindness and for thy truth: **for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.**”

- e. Note: The modern versions are based on an irreverent model of translation that shifts away from the emphasis of each Word of Scripture (Dynamic Vs. Formal Equivalency).

B. Confession (Vs. 5)

1. The Place of his Confession (Vs. 5a)
 - a. Significantly it was as the evening lamb was being offered as a burnt offering that Ezra began to pray his great prayer of confession.
 - b. The offering of the Lamb upon the altar is a reminder of the atoning death of Christ and of the precious blood that is available to cleanse us from every sin. Sin needs to be confessed before the Lamb of God.
2. The Posture of his Confession (Vs. 5b)
 - a. Ezra falls on his knees, a posture of humility and reverence before God. Kneeling is a great posture for prayer as it reminds us we are in the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The most important part of the posture is the attitude of heart it conveys.
 - b. Ez. 10:1 “Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God...”
3. The Prayer of his Confession (Vs. 6-15). This will be the focus of our next message but what a heartfelt, humble prayer of confession this was.

Conclusion: How important is biblical separation to you? Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Confess it to God and experience the cleansing of the blood.