



## National repentance needed: Ezra's example

***'I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.'***

(Ezra 9:4)

Given the abandonment of scriptural norms in our (American) 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 realise 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**

In Ezra 9, the priest Ezra serves as a remarkable example for us of how we ought to observe a day for prayer for a nation. 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 counsellor 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 greatly troubled and perplexed. He was astonished at the dishonour done to God and because of the sorrow the people were about to bring upon themselves.

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 scepticism 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 civilisation.

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. Uncleanliness 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 society. Crime threatens the personal safety of millions. Teenagers, even young children, imitate the murders they watch on television and in the 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 legalised 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 re-election 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 (Isaiah 8:12; Ezra 9:14). Worldliness — that spirit in which every man does that which is right in his own eyes — is rampant. Self-centredness, 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 organised 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 catechising are all on the wane. Little esteem exists for the gospel and its privileges. The blessed Saviour 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 3,000 miles wide, 1,500 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. A US Senator 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:

## **2. Ezra's penitent confession of Israel's sins**

The evening sacrifice was offered daily at 3.00 p.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 fulness 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.

This is what we all need to do surely.

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? There is no better place to be in all the earth than to confess sin at the feet of the merciful Saviour.

There would be real hope for our nations and the entire world if true Christians 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.

Let us ask ourselves: Am I contributing to the swelling of our large debt of national sin? 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, who will not be part of the problem but part of the solution.

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