

I believe in the Holy Spirit

Ezra 10

22 July 2018

God's hand to discipline his people

When was the last time you wept for your sin? I mean actually wept, cried, uncontrollably shed tears because you got a glimpse of the depth of your sin. Have you ever felt the horror of who you really are, in your sinful nature, before a holy God? Have you ever felt the awesome terror of knowing that without Christ, there is no hope of life, no freedom from guilt, no forgiveness of sin?

Every Christian, if they are truly a Christian, must at some point have seen the reality of their sin, and been moved to repentance before God. Remember the day of Pentecost, crowds of people were cut to the heart as they realised how they had treated the Son of God, they repented of their sin and believed. We see the tax collector beating his breast in the temple, crying, Lord have mercy on me, a sinner. We see David lamenting in Psalm 51, 'Against you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.' Think of Daniel, and Jeremiah, Samuel and others too. There must be a day in every believer's life where they consciously chose to turn from their sin, in confession and repentance. The NT pattern is also that it's not just a single moment in the past, some day when you first believed, but it's an ongoing lifestyle – a life of confession and humility, recognising daily our need of a Saviour. Have you truly wept for your sin?

Did you see Ezra in v1 of our passage? Not only was he praying and confessing, but he was weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God. And in this moment, there is a great moving of the Holy Spirit, the beginnings of a revival it seems. Ezra's weeping and wailing attracts a crowd. Why is he crying? He's been there all day in stunned

silence. He's heard that the priests, and the Levites, have led the way in committing spiritual adultery. Did you hear that - it's the *leaders*, one of the horrors of this story in Ezra, is that it's those in charge, those with responsibility, who have been the catalyst for the people's sin. The *leaders* do evil, and the people follow them. They have not separated themselves from the nations around them, from the abominations that the godless commit. V2 says they have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us.

It's now the evening, having been in the presence of God all day, in the polished courts of the newly finished temple. Ezra's been on his knees, hands spread out to the Lord in prayer, with his clothes torn, weeping. And the crowd grows (this is now part 2 of the story, we saw part 1 last week in ch9). More people come, men, women, even children, gather round this inspirational man, and they too begin to weep, bitterly it says. The Spirit of God, the Spirit who reveals the holy nature of the trinity, moves in these people, showing them the spiritual adultery of Israel - the unfaithfulness of God's people, in spite of all God's faithfulness to them - and God reveals how serious it is to commit spiritual adultery. There is much weeping for their sin. This is God's work in them.

Every human heart, hardened in its sin, cannot see the glory of God, *unless* God, by his Spirit, moves in someone's life. The fact that you can call Jesus your Lord, that you're aware of your sinful heart – is only because God has been at work in you. It's because of his great love for us, that God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. The Spirit opens our eyes to our total depravity, and moves us to respond. 2 Corinthians 7 puts it like this: you were made sorry, and your sorrow led you to repentance. For you

became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. My aim tonight is that we would see again, our daily need of repentance, and that godly sorrow would lead to godly living, as the Spirit brings the word of God to life in us.

Ezra and the people of Israel have seen that the very way they are living their lives - their marriages, their families, their closest relationships – are corrupted by sin – it’s spiritual adultery. As Phil was helping us see last week, the people were getting into long term relationships with those who weren’t bothered about God, the true God of Israel. It wasn’t the fact that they had married foreign women in and by itself – anyone, from any nation, was welcome to join the people of God, if they would forsake all others and live for YHWH alone, you are welcome. There are many foreigners among God’s people, even in the genealogy of Jesus. But the problem was spiritual adultery – their hearts were not wholly devoted to God, and would too easily be watered down by the godless ways of the cultures around them.

As God moves, the people realise they must act. As long as you’re alive there is still time to turn from sin, and seek the mercy of God. A great man, Shekariah knows this. He sees the issue, knows what needs to be done, and at the end of v2 says 6 beautiful words. Look at v2, then Shekariah said to Ezra, ‘We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this – here are the 6 words – there is still hope for Israel!’
There is still hope for Israel!

Maybe God has prompting you lately to deal with sin in your life. You know there are habits and things you do that God does not approve of.

You have this guilt that keeps gnawing at your heart (like a bit of mould in the corner of the shower – if you leave it there it's only going to spread). You've tried to stop, you've made promises to yourself and to God, but you keep being drawn back into sinful behaviour. It looks like different things for different people. Sexual sin is rampant, and we live in a culture that actively encourages us to experiment and be proud of sexual immorality - that is any sexual behaviour outside of a marriage between a man and woman – whether its masturbation or pornography, or fantasies and sexting – to real relationships, secret or otherwise, where you're enjoying the blessings of marriage, without the commitment and sacrifice of saying your vows. If that's you, you need to hear Shekariah's 6 words – there is still hope for Israel. But that hope will only come through true repentance.

Perhaps your life is full of greed. We live in a society that bombards us with the message that more is better. Advertising preys on our fear of missing out, or appeals to our pride to look successful and popular. We're greedy for more than we need. And this can be so subtle, whether its just redecorating the house on a whim, or upgrading the car or the phone – just because you can. We don't often recognise that with the great wealth we have in the west, the levels of comfort and luxury we live with are so obscene compared to most parts of the world.

The umbrella organisation for where I work is based in India – and they're looking to move their office to London next year. But there are going to be big issues in the move, because the cost of living in Vellore, is so much cheaper compared to all that you're expected to have here in the west. And yet the same job will be done – but it will cost 2 or 3 times as much because of the expectation here to have a well serviced, air-

conditioned office – fast broadband and good travel links. And you might say, well we need that, we can't compete or stay viable without these things – and that's probably true – but that doesn't mean it's right. We are so wedded to the ways of our society, which is largely based on greed – needing to be bigger and better, it's the foundation of capitalism, never content with what we have, looking for more thrills and experiences, always trying to out-do the bottom line from last year. And I'm as much a part of this as anyone else; I too struggle to see a different way of living here in London, one of the most successful cities in the world. But Shekariah's 6 words offer something different – there is still hope for Israel.

Their plan was to make a covenant. A serious and costly commitment. V3 says, 'Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in *your* hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.'

Every single man in Israel, comes to Jerusalem. It takes 3 days for all these returned exiles to make the journey and gather together in the courts of the temple. It's the middle of December (that's the 9th month in the Hebrew calendar) and on a cold winters day, with the rain pouring down, and the people trembling, Ezra stands up to address them. He rebukes them for their unfaithfulness, and he commands them to separate themselves from the peoples of the land and the foreign women. When the meeting concludes, a commission is established, and 3 months later in early April, the beginning of Spring (the season of new beginnings) 113 men have sent away their wives, and even the children

that they bore – they’re all listed there. There are priests, servants in the temple, family leaders, no class of society is immune from spiritual adultery. And with this great separation, this great act of repentance, the book abruptly ends.

Separation, holiness and faithfulness are the key themes of this chapter. True confession, true weeping for your sin, a true act of God in your heart, leads to a radical transformation not just inside you, but in the way that you live – in the biggest and most serious things of life. To even those deepest relationships that you treasure the most. See what it cost these men to put God first – it was no easy decision – and yet the holiness of God led them to act in the most ruthless of ways, because spiritual adultery, sin, is that serious.

Can I just make a point here, that these chapters are descriptive of a peculiar act of God in a specific time and place, they are not *normative*. That is, if you find yourself married to an unbeliever, this isn’t the normative way or the normal response to how to deal with that. Ezra is descriptive for what was right in that time and place, to deal with *their* spiritual adultery, but when it comes to marriage in the NT we’re taught a different way.

There are 2 principles from the letters to the Corinthians that help us – firstly Christians are instructed to marry within the faith. 2 Corinthians 6.14 is very clear, it says: Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Come out from them and be separate says the Lord. So the normal pattern for us today in the church, is that a Christian ought to only marry another Christian; non-Christians are also free to marry one another, but they shouldn’t mix. That’s a principle we follow even in dating, why else would you go

out with someone, if you weren't hoping it would one day lead to marriage.

But what if in a marriage of 2 non-Christians, one becomes a believer later on? It's not uncommon, and Paul speaks about this too. In 1 Corinthians 7:12, we're told: If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him... each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.

So that's the normative pattern for Christian marriage within the church today. But back to the big theme of Ezra - what we can learn from this book today, is just how serious holiness is to our God. And I want to finish by just pressing home this point. Followers of the Lord Jesus are called to be separate from the ways of the world. Time and again in the epistles, we're called to put off the old self, to have nothing to do with darkness, to live as children of light. As Colossians ch3:5 says: Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You see holiness is essential.

As Christians, we have been made clean by the blood of Jesus, we're going to remember that shortly around this table. This is what makes us acceptable before a holy God, his death and resurrection. And as we're born again, made new people by the Spirit of God, we repent of our old way of living. And to repent, is not a one-time thing in the Bible. Repentance is an ongoing, ever present occurrence. In the orthodox and

catholic traditions, believers are called repenters – an on-going, present-tense verb - it's a description of a way of life, in every decision, doing a 180, turning from our sinful desires, and choosing to make Christ lord of all.

Maybe I make this all sound like this is just something that *we* need to work harder at. To kill sin in our life, the sexual immorality, the impurity, the greed and whatever other sin enslaves us – and yes we do, we must put to death these things, to act in the drastic and radical way that the people in Ezra did. But we don't do it alone, or in our own strength. It's both/and. The Spirit of God gives us all we need to live and glorify him, *he* changes our hearts and gives us a desire to be faithful, but his empowering is not somehow separate or disconnected from *our* will and effort, as if we're just passive puppets – God is over all and through all and in all. So we can say, put sin to death, take concrete steps to act and kill the habits and thought patterns that enslave us and dishonour the name of Jesus. And as we act in the strength that God gives, he gets all the glory.

As Shekariah encouraged the great leader Ezra, he said, there is still hope for Israel. Whatever situation you find yourself in, there is no sin too great that you are without hope. But it all starts with weeping for your sin – a godly sorrow that leads to repentance.

Let me close with this story: In March of 1859, (nearly 160 years ago) some men with a passion for revival preached at the First Presbyterian Church in Ahoghill, Northern Ireland. There was such a large crowd at that meeting that they had to close it out of fear that the balconies would collapse under the weight of so many people – something drew them there that day. But they took the meeting to the street right outside the

church, and in the freezing rain at the end of the Irish winter, a man called James McQuilkin preached to 3,000 people in the streets. The Spirit of God was at work, and like in Ezra on that rainy December day, many of the listeners to this man's preaching, fell to their knees in the wet and muddy street because they were so moved by their conviction of sin under the preaching of the word of God. That moment, was the beginning of a great move of God, the Ulster revival, that would spread and bring more than a million souls to the Lord here in Great Britain. You can read about these great revivals of the past, look out for them.

I long for God to do something like that again today, don't you? But it starts with each one of us, being convicted of our own sin, turning to a merciful God for salvation, , and that by living a life of repentance, radically, daily, putting to death our sinful nature, doing whatever it costs, like we see here in Ezra - we know that in Christ there is hope. Pray with me for God to be at work, even here tonight.