

GUILT AND A PRAYER; EZRA CH. 9

The Jews had a hard time staying faithful. The Old Testament is riddled with examples of the Jewish people falling short, being punished and being restored. We do, after all, have a God of second chances, and third, and fourth...What we have here is disobedience by Gods people, God promising to punish them with 70 years of captivity at the hands of the Babylonians, God following through on His promise and then the Jews being permitted to return home to restore Gods temple that Nebuchadnezer had destroyed. God even touched the hearts of three secular kings to bless them with freedom, money and supplies to accomplish the task. However, no sooner do they experience a little bit of freedom and success do they forget God's grace and fall back into their iniquities (I'm fairly certain we can relate to this).

The book of Ezra is actually broken down into two parts. First, we have the release of the Jews from Babylonian captivity (ch. 1-6), then 60 years later we have Ezra come on the scene with the second release of Jews, roughly 2,000 of them, only to discover that they have intermarried with pagans, corrupting the blood line of Gods chosen people (ch. 7-10).

The release of the Jewish people from captivity should have been a wakeup call but it didn't take long for them to dismiss God's wishes. Throughout the Old Testament we see the importance of keeping the blood line of God's people pure, to ensure secularism doesn't diminish their devotion to God. Those of the Levitical priesthood dismissed this proclamation from God and had relations with the people of the land. This isn't promoting racial purity like we might imagine today. This wasn't a blood line to dismiss people of a particular pigment, it was a blood line that would ensure faithfulness in God endured. You see, the groups they had marital relations with were historically Jewish. The Canaanites, Jebusites, Hittites, etc. were initially God-fearing people that had abandoned Gods will. Their secular lifestyle of these groups would undoubtedly diminish the love for God that the Jews had and like a domino effect, a few generations down the line we would have a nation that had dismissed God entirely (much like the communist and socialist nations of today).

Which brings us to chapter 9, where we find Ezra absolutely livid when he discovers the people that have just been released from captivity and warned not to have relations with the secular people of the land had done just that. Had they learned nothing? They had just spent 70 years in Babylonian captivity, had their land stripped from them, kings dethroned, all because of disobedience. This was once a kingdom, now it is just a province with princes rather than a king. Ezra, the current prophet is furious. He uses old Hebrew tradition, tears his clothes and even goes so far as to rip hair out of his head and beard before sitting down silent in absolute befuddlement. He stays this way surrounded by those who truly fear God until the evening offering when he finally rises only to fall on his knees, spread out his arms and give a prayer and plead to God that makes my prayers seem childish.

Ezra isn't giving a soft, quiet prayer of thanks for a meal, he is pleading with God, letting Him know just how ashamed he is. He is embarrassed and ashamed of their iniquities, announcing their guilt to the fullest. He says "we have been disobedient from the time of our fathers and it led to captivity, then you showed us grace and this is how we repay you. You have been loving and kind to us, provided sustenance, materials to build temples, and we repay you by forsaking your commandments. You told us to stay pure for the strength and inheritance of future generations and this is how we repay you, by

forsaking your commandments the first chance we get.” He says “God, you are righteous and great, we are nothing more than pathetic sinners”, the man is crying to God for mercy in a prayer that gives me chills. What’s even more incredible is that his prayers have nothing to do with his personal sin or iniquity. He has personally done nothing wrong. Ezra is going to Heaven because his love for God comes before himself and he has devoted his life to spreading God’s word to those around him. His cries go up to Heaven for the sake of those around him, he is absolutely destroyed because of their sin, not his. We don’t even get that worked up about our own sin, let alone the sin of those around us.

When it was all said and done, the Hebrew people took action, divorces were granted and a fresh start was made. It had to be difficult, likely more than I would be willing to do, leaving your wife and children whom you have devoted your life to and love. That ,however, was the only way to rectify the situation. Take action, repent, and seek the will of God. Sacrifice had to be made, but there has certainly been a sacrifice made on our behalf so surely we can bite the bullet now and again.

While the Old Testament Jews make for wonderful whipping boys, we are easily just as tarnished, if not more so. It is scripture like this that tells us why the Old Testament is just as relevant as the New. It all points to saving grace and the Son on the Cross that does for us what we cannot do for ourselves and forgives the sins that should surely lead to eternal damnation. This scripture shows us a people that had it all, disobeyed Gods commandments, had it all stripped away, through grace was given their land back and then as if they had learned nothing at all started down the old path once again. God is one who always gives an out. That is His grace.

This brings me to the end where I say that we as a Church would greatly benefit by recognizing the sin in our lives that we have grown so used to that we know longer give it thought. We would do good to recognize the gravity of God’s grace and just how fortunate we are. Daily, each day we would benefit from a moment to reflect on our oh so common peccadilloes and how fortunate we are to have a God that has enough grace to say “it’s okay, you are human after all”. We would do good to recognize those things in other peoples lives (while not necessarily bringing it up because my sin is just as relevant as theirs) and bringing that concern to God just as Ezra did. We would also do good to work on how we bring those concerns to God. Could you imagine if we had a prayer life like Ezra? Knees dirty, arms spread wide, pleading to a great and holy merciful God.