

# CHAPTER 9

The affairs of the church were in a very good posture, we may well suppose, now that Ezra presided in them. Look without; the government was kind to them. We hear no complaints of persecution and oppression; their enemies had either their hearts turned or at least their hands tied; their neighbours were civil, and we hear of no wars nor rumours of wars; there were none to make them afraid; all was as well as could be, considering that they were few, and poor, and subjects to a foreign prince. Look at home; we hear nothing of Baal, or Ashtaroth, nor Moloch, no images, nor groves, nor golden calves, no, nor so much as high places (not only no idolatrous altars, but no separate ones), but the temple was duly respected and the temple service carefully kept up. Yet all was not well either. The purest ages of the church have had some corruptions, and it will never be presented “without spot or wrinkle” till it is “a glorious church,” a church “triumphant,” <sup><4157></sup>Ephesians 5:27. We have here,

- I.** A complaint brought to Ezra of the many marriages that had been made with strange wives (v. 1, 2).
- II.** The great trouble which he, and others influenced by his example, were in upon this information (v. 3, 4).
- III.** The solemn confession which he made of this sin to God, with godly sorrow, and shame (v. 5-15).

## <sup><4100></sup>EZRA 9:1-4

### EZRA'S REFORMATION

Ezra, like Barnabas when he came to Jerusalem and *saw the grace of God* to his brethren there, no doubt *was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave to the Lord*, <sup><4412></sup>Acts 11:23. He saw nothing amiss (many corruptions lurk out of the view of the most vigilant rulers); but here is a damp upon his joys: information is brought him that many of the people, yea, and some of the rulers, had married wives out of heathen families, and joined themselves in affinity with strangers. Observe,

**I.** What the sin was that they were guilty of: it was *mingling with the people of those lands* (v. 2), associating with them both in trade and in conversation, making themselves familiar with them, and, to complete the affinity, taking *their daughters in marriages* to their sons. We are willing to hope that they did not worship their gods, but that their captivity had cured them of their idolatry: it is said indeed that they *did according to their abominations*; but that (says bishop Patrick) signifies here only the imitation of the heathen in promiscuous marriages with any nation whatsoever, which by degrees would lead them to idolatry. Herein,

**1.** They disobeyed the express command of God, which forbade all intimacy with the heathen, and particularly in matrimonial contracts, ~~<RUB>~~Deuteronomy 7:3.

**2.** They profaned the crown of their peculiarity, and set themselves upon a level with those above whom God had by singular marks of his favour, of late as well as formerly, dignified them.

**3.** They distrusted the power of God to protect and advance them, and were led by carnal policy, hoping to strengthen themselves and make an interest among their neighbours by these alliances. A practical disbelief of God's all-sufficiency is at the bottom of all the sorry shifts we make to help ourselves.

**4.** They exposed themselves, and much more their children, to the peril of idolatry, the very sin, and introduced by this very way, that had cone been the ruin of their church and nation.

**II.** Who were the persons that were guilty of this sin, not only some of the unthinking people of Israel, that knew no better, but *many of the priests and Levites*, whose office it was to teach the law, and this law among the rest, and in whom, by reason of their elevation above common Israelites, it was a greater crime. It was a diminution to the sons of that tribe to match into any other tribe, and they seldom did except into the royal tribe; but for them to match with heathen, with Canaanites, and Hittites, and I know not whom, was such a disparagement as, if they had had any sense, though not of duty, yet of honour, one would think, they would never have been guilty of. Yet this was not the worst: *The hand of the princes and rulers*, who by their power should have prevented or reformed this high misdemeanour, *was chief in this trespass*. If princes be in a trespass, they will be charged as chief in it, because of the influence their examples will have upon others.

*Many will follow their pernicious ways.* But miserable is the case of that people whose leaders debauch them and cause them to err.

**III.** The information that was given of this to Ezra. It was given by the persons that were most proper to complain, the princes, those of them that had kept their integrity and with it their dignity; they could not have accused others if they themselves had not been free from blame. It was given to the person who had power to mend the matter, who, as a *ready scribe in the law of God*, could argue with them, and, as king's commissioner, could awe them. It is probable that these princes had often endeavoured to redress this grievance and could not; but now they applied to Ezra, hoping that his wisdom, authority, and interest, would prevail to do it. Those that cannot of themselves reform public abuses may yet do good service by giving information to those that can.

**IV.** The impression this made upon Ezra (v. 3): *He rent his clothes, plucked off his hair, and sat down astonished.* Thus he expressed the deep sense he had,

**1.** Of the dishonour hereby done to God. It grieved him to the heart to think that a people called by his name should so grossly violate his law, should be so little benefited by his correction, and make such bad returns for his favours.

**2.** Of the mischief the people had hereby done to themselves and the danger they were in of the wrath of God breaking out against them. Note,

**(1.)** The sins of others should be our sorrow, and the injury done by them to God's honour and the souls of men is what we should lay to heart.

**(2.)** Sorrow for sin must be great sorrow; such Ezra's was, *as for an only son or a first-born.*

**(3.)** The scandalous sins of professors are what we have reason to be astonished at. We may stand amazed to see men contradict, disparage, prejudice, ruin, themselves. Strange that men should act so inconsiderately and so inconsistently with themselves! Upright men are astonished at it.

**V.** The influence which Ezra's grief for this had upon others. We may suppose that he *went up to the house of the Lord*, there to humble himself, because he had an eye to God in his grief and that was the proper place for deprecating his displeasure. Public notice was soon taken of it, and all the

devout serious people that were at hand assembled themselves to him, it should seem of their own accord, for nothing is said of their being sent, to, v. 4. Note,

1. It is the character of good people that they *tremble at God's word*; they stand in awe of the authority of its precepts and the severity and justice of its threatenings, and to those that do so *will God look*, ~~<300>~~ Isaiah 66:2.
2. Those that tremble *at the word of God* cannot but tremble *at the sins of men*, by which the law of God is broken and his wrath and curse are incurred.
3. The pious zeal of one against sin may perhaps provoke very many to the like, as the apostle speaks in another case, ~~<400>~~ 2 Corinthians 9:2. Many will follow who have not consideration, talent, and courage, enough to lead in a good work.
4. All good people ought to own those that appear and act in the cause of God against vice and profaneness, to stand by them, and do what they can to strengthen their hands.

## ~~<500>~~ EZRA 9:5-15

### EZRA'S REFORMATION

What the meditations of Ezra's heart were, while for some hours he sat down astonished, we may guess by the words of his mouth when at length he *spoke with his tongue*; and a most pathetic address he here makes to Heaven upon this occasion. Observe,

- I. The time when he made this address — *at the evening sacrifice*, v. 5. Then (it is likely) devout people used to come into the courts of the temple, to grace the solemnity of the sacrifice and to offer up their own prayers to God in concurrence with it. In their hearing Ezra chose to make this confession, that they might be made duly sensible of the sins of their people, which hitherto they had either not taken notice of or had made light of. Prayer may preach. The sacrifice, and especially the evening sacrifice, was a type of the great propitiation, that *blessed Lamb of God* which in the evening of the world was to *take away sin by the sacrifice of himself*, to which we may suppose Ezra had an eye of faith in this penitential address

to God; he makes confession with his hand, as it were, upon the head of that great sacrifice, through which *we receive the atonement*. Certainly Ezra was no stranger to the message which the angel Gabriel had some years ago delivered to Daniel, at the time of the evening sacrifice, and as it were in explication of it, concerning Messiah the Prince (~~2702~~ Daniel 9:21, 24); and perhaps he had regard to that in choosing this time.

## II. His preparation for this address.

1. He *rose up from his heaviness*, and so far shook off the burden of his grief as was necessary to the lifting up of his heart to God. He recovered from his astonishment, got the tumult of his troubled spirits somewhat stilled and his spirit composed for communion with God.
2. He *fell upon his knees*, put himself into the posture of a penitent humbling himself and a petitioner suing for mercy, in both representing the people for whom he was now an intercessor.
3. He *spread out his hands*, as one affected with what he was going to say, offering it up unto God, waiting, and reaching out, as it were, with an earnest expectation, to receive a gracious answer. In this he had an eye to God as the Lord, and as his God, a God of power, but a God of grace.

III. The address itself. It is not properly to be called a prayer, for there is not a word of petition in it; but, if we give prayer its full latitude, it is the offering up of pious and devout affections to God, and very devout, very pious, are the affections which Ezra here expresses. His address is a penitent confession of sin, not his own (from a conscience burdened with its own guilt and apprehensive of his own danger), but the sin of his people, from a gracious concern for the honour of God and the welfare of Israel. Here is a lively picture of ingenuous repentance. Observe in this address,

1. The confession he makes of the sin and the aggravations of it, which he insists upon, to affect his own heart and theirs that joined with him with holy sorrow and shame and fear, in the consideration of it, that they might be deeply humbled for it. And it is observable that, though he himself was wholly clear from this guilt, yet he puts himself into the number of the sinners, because he was a member of the same community — *our sins and our trespass*. Perhaps he now remembered it against himself, as his fault, that he had staid so long after his brethren in Babylon, and had not

separated himself so soon as he might have done from the people of those lands. When we are lamenting the wickedness of the wicked, it may be, if we duly reflect upon ourselves and give our own hearts leave to deal faithfully with us, we may find something of the same nature, though in a lower degree, that we also have been guilty of. However, he speaks that which was, or should have been, the general complaint.

**(1.)** He owns their sins to have been very great: “*Our iniquities are increased over our heads* (v. 6); we are ready to perish in them as in keep waters;” so general was the prevalency of them, so violent the power of them, and so threatening were they of the most pernicious consequences. “Iniquity has grown up to such a height among us that it reaches to the heavens, so very impudent that it dares heaven, so very provoking that, like the sin of Sodom, it cries to heaven for vengeance.” But let this be the comfort of true penitents that though their sins reach to the heavens God’s mercy is *in the heavens*, <sup><3816></sup>Psalm 36:5. *Where sin abounds grace will much more abound.*

**(2.)** Their sin had been long persisted in (v. 7): *Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass.* The example of those that had gone before them he thought so far from excusing their fault that it aggravated it. “We should have taken warning not to stumble at the same stone. The corruption is so much the worse that it has taken deep root and begins to plead prescription, but by this means we have reason to fear that the measure of the iniquity is nearly full.”

**(3.)** The great and sore judgments which God had brought upon them for their sins did very much aggravate them: “*For our iniquities we have been delivered to the sword and to captivity* (v. 7), and yet not reformed, yet not reclaimed — brayed in the mortar, and yet the *folly not gone* (<sup><3872></sup>Proverbs 27:22) — corrected, but not reclaimed.”

**(4.)** The late mercies God had bestowed upon them did likewise very much aggravate their sins. This he insists largely upon, v. 8, 9. Observe,

**[1.]** The time of mercy: *Now for a little space*, that is, “It is but a little while since we had our liberty, and it is not likely to continue long.” This greatly aggravated their sin, that they were so lately in the furnace and that they knew not how soon they might return to it again; and could they yet be secure?

[2.] The fountain of mercy: *Grace has been shown us from the Lord*. The kings of Persia were the instruments of their enlargement; but he ascribes it to God and to his grace, his free grace, without any merit of theirs.

[3.] The streams of mercy, — that they were *not forsaken in their bondage*, but even in Babylon had the tokens of God's presence, — that they were a remnant of Israelites left, a few out of many, and those narrowly escaped out of the hands of their enemies, by the favour of the kings of Persia, — and especially that they had *a nail in his holy place*, that is (as it is explained, v. 9), that they had set up the *house of God*. They had their religion settled and the service of the temple in a constant method. We are to reckon it a great comfort and advantage to have stated opportunities of worshipping God. *Blessed are those that dwell in God's house*, like Anna that departed not from the temple. *This is my rest for ever*, says the gracious soul.

[4.] The effects of all this. It enlightened their eyes, and it revived their hearts; that is, it was very comfortable to them, and the more sensibly so because it was in their bondage: it was life from the dead to them. Though but *a little reviving*, it was a great favour, considering that they deserved none and the day of small things was an earnest of greater. “Now,” says Ezra, “how ungrateful are we to offend a God that has been so kind to us! how disingenuous to mingle in sin with those nations from whom we have been, in wonderful mercy, delivered! how unwise to expose ourselves to God's displeasure when we are tried with the returns of his favour and are upon our good behaviour for the continuance of it!”

(5.) It was a great aggravation of the sin that it was against an express command: *We have forsaken thy commandments*, v. 10. It seems to have been an ancient law of the house of Jacob not to match with the families of the uncircumcised, <sup><0344></sup>Genesis 34:14. But, besides that, God had strictly forbidden it. He recites the command, v. 11, 12. For sin appears sin, appears exceedingly sinful, when we compare it with the law which is broken by it. Nothing could be more express: *Give not your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons*. The reason given is because, if they mingled with those nations, they would pollute themselves. It was an unclean land, and they were a holy people; but if they kept themselves distinct from them it would be their honour and safety, and the perpetuating of their prosperity. Now to violate a command so express,

backed with such reasons, and a fundamental law of their constitution, was very provoking to the God of heaven.

(6.) That in the judgments by which they had already smarted for their sins God had *punished them less than their iniquities deserved*, so that he looked upon them to be still in debt upon the old account. “What! and yet shall we run up a new score? Has God dealt so gently with us in correcting us, and shall we thus abuse his favour and turn his grace into wantonness?” God, in his grace and mercy, had said concerning Sion's captivity, *She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins* (<sup><234D></sup>Isaiah 40:2); but Ezra, in a penitential sense of the great malignity that was in their sin, acknowledged that, though the punishment was very great, it was less than they deserved.

2. The devout affections that were working in him, in making this confession. Speaking of sin,

(1.) He speaks as one much ashamed. With this he begins (v. 6), *O my God! I am ashamed and blush, O my God!* (so the words are placed) *to lift up my face unto thee*. Note,

[1.] Sin is a shameful thing; as soon as ever our first parents had eaten forbidden fruit they were ashamed of themselves.

[2.] Holy shame is as necessary an ingredient in true and ingenuous repentance as holy sorrow.

[3.] The sins of others should be our shame, and we should blush for those who do not blush for themselves. We may well be ashamed that we are any thing akin to those who are so ungrateful to God and unwise for themselves. This is *clearing ourselves*, <sup><271D></sup>2 Corinthians 7:11.

[4.] Penitent sinners never see so much reason to blush and be ashamed as when they come to *lift up their faces before God*. A natural sense of our own honour which we have injured will make us ashamed, when we have done a wrong thing, to look men in the face; but a gracious concern for God's honour will make us much more ashamed to look him in the face. The publican, when he went to the temple to pray, hung down his head more than ever, as one ashamed, <sup><281D></sup>Luke 18:13.

[5.] An eye to God as our God will be of great use to us in the exercise of repentance. Ezra begins, *O my God!* and again in the same breath, *My God*.



The consideration of our covenant-relation to God as ours will help to humble us, and break our hearts for sin, that we should violate both his precepts to us and our promises to him; it will also encourage us to hope for pardon upon repentance. “He is my God, notwithstanding this;” and every transgression in the covenant does not throw us out of covenant.

(2.) He speaks as one much amazed (v. 10) “*What shall we say after this?* For my part I know not what to say: if God do not help us, we are undone.” The discoveries of guilt excite amazement: the more we think of sin the worse it looks. The difficulty of the case excites amazement. How shall we recover ourselves? Which way shall we make our peace with God?

[1.] True penitents are at a loss what to say. Shall we say, We have *not sinned*, or, *God will not require it?* If we do, *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. Shall we say, Have patience with us and we will pay thee all, with *thousands of rams, or our first-born for our transgression?* God will not thus be mocked: he knows we are insolvent. Shall we say, *There is no hope*, and *let come on us what will?* That is but to make bad worse.

[2.] True penitents will consider what to say, and should, as Ezra, beg of God to teach them. What shall we say? Say, “I have sinned; I have done foolishly; God be merciful to me a sinner;” and the like. See <sup><34></sup>Hosea 14:2.

(3.) He speaks as one much afraid, v. 13, 14. “After all the judgments that have come upon us to reclaim us from sin, and all the deliverances that have been wrought for us to engage us to God and duty, *if we should again break God's commandments, by joining in affinity with the children of disobedience* and learning their ways, what else could we expect but that God should be *angry with us till he had consumed us*, and there should not be so much as a remnant left, nor any to escape the destruction?” There is not a surer nor sadder presage of ruin to any people than revolting to sin, to the same sins again, after great judgments and great deliverances. Those that will be wrought upon neither by the one nor by the other are fit to be rejected, as reprobate silver, for the *founder melteth in vain*.

(4.) He speaks as one much assured of the righteousness of God, and resolved to acquiesce in that and to leave the matter with him whose judgment is *according to truth* (v. 15): “*Thou art righteous, wise, just, and*

good; thou wilt neither do us wrong nor be hard upon us; and therefore behold *we are before thee*, we lie at thy feet, waiting our doom; *we cannot stand before thee*, insisting upon any righteousness of our own, having no plea to support us or bring us off, and therefore we fall down before thee, in our trespass, and cast ourselves on thy mercy. *Do unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee,* <sup><07005></sup>Judges 10:15. We have nothing to say, nothing to do, but to *make supplication to our Judge,* <sup><18005></sup>Job 9:15. Thus does this good man lay his grief before God and then leave it with him.