

Is God's Mercy Leading You To Godly Shame?

Ezra 9:7-9

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Are the material blessings in your life an indication that there is no need for you to turn to Christ for the forgiveness of sin, no need of repentance in grieving and mourning for sin, and no need of renewing your loving obedience to walk humbly in His commandments? In other words, if the Lord grants to you such blessings as your family, your home, your job, a measure of good health or healing from sickness, do such blessings give you a sense of urgency to use God's means of grace to strike (and to continue to strike) at the root of a besetting sin in your life, or do such blessings tend to give you a false sense of security in procrastinating, forgetting, and ignoring sins in your life that have taken root in your life and lead you away from Christ?

Dear ones, when everything seems to be going well, we are not so prone to examine our hearts and lives as to whether there are areas of sin which we continue to follow (with little to no serious effort to use God's grace to overcome). It is usually only when our loving Father brings some great trial or affliction into our lives, that He actually gets our attention. Have you considered that our gracious Heavenly Father turns to trials and afflictions to get our attention because we will not willingly give our complete and wholehearted devotion to Him in being humbled by His tender mercies to such an extent that we in shame pour out our hearts to Him not only confessing our sin, but taking our sin seriously. Dear ones, the blessed times we enjoy as mercies from the Lord are also times for us to cry out to the Lord, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

From our text this Lord's Day, we shall see that the mercy of God in protecting them and providing for His people, Israel, was not the Lord's approbation and approval of their sinful covenant-breaking, but was rather a time graciously granted to His people to turn in faith to the Lord and to forsake their sin. The main points from our text are the following: (1) A Review Of Israel's Sins (Ezra 9:7); and (2) A Misuse of God's Mercies (Ezra 9:8-9).

I. A Review of Israel's Sins (Ezra 9:7).

A. Perhaps a brief review of events leading up to our text would be helpful at this point.

1. After Ezra and his remnant of reformers had safely arrived in Jerusalem, having been preserved by the Lord from the ambush of enemies as they traveled on the road to reformation from Babylon to Jerusalem, they proceeded to embark upon a biblical reformation in church and state. However, shortly after moving forward with reformation in Jerusalem, Ezra was shocked by an altogether unexpected report that God's people (even priests and princes within Jerusalem) had begun intermingling in close and familiar discourse with the unbelieving people of the nations around them, even to the point of intermarrying with the unbelievers from these nations (contrary to the gracious Covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai).

2. Upon hearing this astonishing news, Ezra was so grieved that he tore his garments, pulled out some of his hair and beard (not in an outburst of anger, but as cultural signs of great sorrow), and was unable to speak from the morning until the evening sacrifice.

3. He then arose and went to the Temple, and there offered a public prayer (which we are now considering)—a public prayer that God used to bring shame upon His people to such an extent that they turned

from their sin and sought the mercy and forgiveness of God for their backsliding.

B. Ezra began his public prayer with these words in Ezra 9:6 (read it). The godly shame expressed here by Ezra is a sense of disgrace and sorrow over how God's honor, God's holiness, and God's grace have been trampled underfoot by their sin. Dear ones, a true repentance and change of heart in our lives must begin with our offense against the Lord "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). True repentance before God is not simply regret over the consequences of our sin or getting caught, but is rather that we have treated our most holy and most gracious God who redeemed us and saved us with such dishonor and glory in our sight. Dear ones, if we are more concerned over the consequences of our sin than how we have offended that high and lofty King who has made us, provided for us, and saved us, then we have not yet been humbled before the Lord and have not truly repented of our sin.

C. Ezra continues his public prayer in Ezra 9:7 by recounting in the hearing of God's people how the flagrant sins of their fathers (in grossly violating the Ten Commandments and continuing in those sins for long and extended periods of time) had brought God's fatherly displeasure and severe discipline against His people, in delivering them into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity for so many years. God continued to send His prophets to warn them of their backsliding into sin and to call them to humble repentance and shame that they might be forgiven. And although there were intermittent times of reformation in Judah, God's people inevitably returned (like a dog to its vomit) back to idolatry, to covenant-breaking, to tyranny in oppressing the poor, and to persecution of the faithful witnesses of the Lord until the longsuffering of the Lord gave way to delivering His people into the hands of enemies who hated and

despised them and enslaved them (like the Assyrians and the Babylonians).

1. Dear ones, our God is a jealous God—in a good and right sense (Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:14). The God who created us and has redeemed us as Christians calls us to worship, serve, and obey Him supremely. He calls us to give unto Him our highest affection, love, and devotion for we belong to Him by creation and redemption (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Just as a husband and wife should rightfully be jealous of the unique affection and devotion of one another in not having rivals to that marital affection and honor, so the Lord our God rightfully deserves that supreme love, devotion, and obedience from us (with no rivals—“Thou shalt have no other gods BEFORE ME” Exodus 20:3). Thus, dear ones, when we stubbornly resist the gracious entreaties and calls of the Holy Spirit through the reading and preaching of His Word and though His many blessings to us, God, in His righteous jealousy which burns that we be wholly devoted to Him, will bring His fatherly discipline (and very severe discipline at times) in order to restore us in love back unto Himself (Hebrews 12:5-11).

2. We may think that just because we are not making an image and bowing down to it, or just because we are not cursing God with our tongues, or just because we are not murdering our neighbor, or just because we are not sleeping around with those to whom we are not married, that we are not stubbornly resisting the Lord and bringing dishonor to his most holy and gracious name. Dear ones, true biblical reformation is not simply cleaning up the outward man. True biblical reformation is striking at the very root of those outward sins in our heart, mind, and imagination. Certainly we should see all outward violations of God’s holy commandments as sins committed against the Lord for which we must fall upon the mercy of God in order to receive God’s fatherly forgiveness and in order to be delivered from those outward sins, but I wonder if we take as seriously the inward sins, which are not so evident

to the casual observer, but which lead to the outward sins into which we fall and fall and fall (over and over again)? For, dear ones, it is these inward sins that are the root which produces the corrupt fruit of vile and profane speech, outbursts of anger, ignoring consistent time spent with the Lord in prayer, fornication and adultery, lying and stealing, and making people and things more important in your life than the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider with me the following illustrations of this tendency in our lives.

a. We outwardly are angry with God and His providence (in what the Lord has brought into our lives), and we curse our fellow man. But do we not see that the root sin is that we are not consciously willing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as supreme ruler of our lives? We profess with our lips that He is Lord, but do we inwardly submit our wills (and all that we are and all that we have) voluntarily to Him every day?

b. We outwardly make our lives to consist of that which is merely of this world (whether our family, our job, our possessions, our education, our gifts and abilities, our earthly goals, the approval of others). But do we not see that this sin proceeds from inward idolatry in which our love, affection, and devotion is supremely fixed upon this world rather than upon our God and Savior, Jesus Christ? We have left our first love—Christ. Our love of Christ consists in how it use to be, not how it presently is. You know that your relationship with your wife/husband is in trouble if that is the case, and you know that your relationship with Christ is likewise in trouble if that is the case.

c. We outwardly worry with fear and anxiety about what will happen in our life, what will happen to our family, and what will happen to our world. But do we not see that this is the fruit of inward unbelief in not trusting in the unchangeable Lord who cannot lie and His promises that are ever true?

d. We outwardly are consumed with pleasure, with satisfying the flesh, with gazing upon pornography. But do we not see that these are many currents of sin that flow from our own inward self-centered desires that must be satisfied at all costs? Our desire to satisfy the flesh is stronger than our desire to please our Savior.

e. We outwardly are so critical of others, gossiping and slandering others behind their backs. But do we not see that these are the sparks that shoot forth from the flame of pride, arrogance, and self-importance? We must put others down in order to exalt ourselves.

3. Dear ones, if it is such inward sins in our lives to which we stubbornly cling and which we resist to uproot (by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ), then how will we escape God's fatherly discipline any more than did Israel? Our approach so often in dealing with sin is to wait until the severity of God's discipline becomes so conspicuous by way of great afflictions and trials (not that all afflictions and trials are necessarily due to sin in a Christian's life—see Job). Or even when take some action against sin in our lives, we simply chop off the weed at ground level, rather than going to the root of the problem beneath the surface.

a. Dear ones, there will never be any long-term victory over the besetting sins in our lives by taking that approach. We must shine the light of God's Word and cry out for His Spirit to search out these root sins within us, so that we might be delivered not only from the fruit of these sins that keep on popping up, but also the root of these sins.

b. If we allow the head of the serpent into our tents, it will not be long before the whole body of the serpent is in our tent. We must take off the head of the serpent, and then the rest of the body will be overcome.

c. There is no overcoming sin in the life of a Christian without such a "no compromise approach" to sin. The Christian is not to

be taking prisoners (to feed and house them) when it comes to sin in his/her life. These enemies of our soul are out to destroy us. These sins are intruders and we must treat them with as much vigilance as we watch over ourselves and families against intruders into our homes.

d. Consider how the Lord calls us to take definitive action daily in fleeing from sins, as did Joseph (in 1 Corinthians 6:18—flee fornication; 1 Corinthians 10:14—flee idolatry; 2 Timothy 2:22—flee youthful lusts, but follow or pursue righteousness, faith, charity, and peace). These inward motions and outward actions are aggressive, not passive. They are continuous, not sporadic. So often we are just too lazy and too comfortable when it comes to sin in our lives (at least until God's severe discipline falls). But the Lord commands us to continually "exercise" ourselves as Christians to godliness (1 Timothy 4:7—*gumnazo* from our word gymnasium).

e. But this fleeing sin, pursuing righteousness, and leaving our lazy couches to exercise ourselves continually in godliness is not a matter of mere will-power. It is the power of the resurrected Christ, working in you both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). It is not a preoccupation with sin that overcomes sin, it is a continual feasting upon the grace and power of the resurrected Christ that overcomes sin. It is through our continual fellowship and communion with Christ, delighting in the time that we spend with Christ in prayer that the power of sin is overcome in our lives. It is reckoning by faith that Christ has conquered sin, and through faith, I am united to Christ as a conqueror over sin. The grace and the power of Christ is ours to overcome sin in our lives (we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us, where sin abounded grace did much more abound), the only question is, Are we going to continue to chop off the tail of the serpent-like sins, or are we going to chop off the head of the serpent-like sins? Are we going to continue to make excuses to ourselves and to God as to why we will stubbornly cling to and flirt with these sins? Are we

going to sit around like lazy victims and be overcome by these destroying intruders, or are we going to arm ourselves and exercise ourselves to godliness?

II. A Misuse of God's Mercies (Ezra 9:8-9).

A. In verse 7, the prayer of Ezra focuses upon the past judgment that God has sent upon His people, Israel, for their stubbornness in their trespasses (even after times of reformation and after repeated warnings from the Lord). But now in verses 8-9, the prayer of Ezra focuses upon the present grace that God has sent unto His people, Israel, and how this present grace from the loving hand of the Lord has been misused and has become an excuse to continue in their sin. But dear ones, their (and our) misuse of God's mercies in ignoring sin only becomes a further aggravation of sin with more severe discipline to follow, if they (and we) do not turn in faith to the Lord for His mercy and humbly repent of their backsliding and covenant-breaking in intermingling (by way of close and familiar relationships) with the unbelieving nations about them and intermarrying with them (Ezra 9:1-2). Note the grace and mercy shown unto His people, Israel, by the God who made of Israel His covenanted bride.

1. God graciously delivered a remnant of Israel out of Babylonian captivity ("to leave us a remnant to escape" Ezra 9:8). Christ has delivered all who trust in Christ alone by faith alone out of our own spiritual captivity to sin and Satan and the Harlot of Babylon.

2. God graciously gave His people, Israel, a home in the Promise Land, which encouraged their hearts with great joy ("and to give us a nail [i.e. a fixed and settled place—GLP], that our God may lighten our eyes" Ezra 9:8). Christ has provided for our earthly needs and has purchased an eternal home, the New Jerusalem, to all those who trust in Christ alone by faith alone.

3. God graciously gave to His people, Israel, a reviving and coming alive as a Church and a Nation, when it appeared they were dead and buried in captivity (“and give us a little reviving in our bondage” Ezra 9:8). Ezekiel 37:11-14 prophesies of this reviving of Israel as a nation that is initially fulfilled in the return of God’s people from Babylonian captivity (but which will be fully realized when “all Israel shall be saved” (according to Paul in Romans 11:26). The reason it is said to be a “little” reviving is because Israel was still under the Kings of Persia (still in bondage to some degree, but yet enjoying a relative degree of freedom and the blessings of God within the Land God had given to them). Likewise, the Church of Christ presently enjoys a little reviving among its enemies, but it will enjoy a greater reviving in the millennium, and a full and perfect reviving in the glories of the New Heaven and New Earth after the Second Coming of Christ. Dear ones, each of you who trust alone in Christ alone have had a little reviving in your regeneration (although in this life you continue to war against enemies within and without), but do not lose heart for at the Second Coming of Christ, our bodies will be gloriously raised from the dead and conformed to the body of Christ and will be forever set free from all temptation, sin, misery, heartache, pain, and death—then our reviving will be absolutely complete and eternal.

4. God graciously gave to His people, Israel, Persian rulers who not only set them free from Babylonian captivity, but gave to them all of the material resources and power to rebuild the Temple, to repair their city and homes, and to see some degree of fortification established for safety against their enemies (“ For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persian, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem” Ezra 9:9). Dear ones, we may be a scattered remnant of Covenanters, but the Lord has given to us a reviving to be able to meet by conference call, and to worship together, and to bind our

hearts together in love and obedience in receiving the ordinances that we can enjoy by phone (until the Lord provides by way of moves or by way of more faithful ministers a ministry in each location). What means of grace and what blessings has the Lord graciously provided for you, even now, in order to encourage you in your faith and growth in Jesus Christ? Are you thankful for each of these blessings? Do these blessings that God has given to you in His mercy humble you and send you in love and thankfulness to Christ and cause you to flee sin and pursue righteousness? Or do these blessings during even little periods of reviving and reformation in your life, family, and in your covenanted brethren make you lazy and comfortable in your sin? Apparently, the effect of God's grace and mercy to His people, Israel, was to lead their hearts away from their first love, Jesus Christ, and rather to become worldly believers who became increasingly conformed to the unbelieving world around them.

B. Dear ones, the public prayer of Ezra was intended to bring God's people, Israel, to shame for how they had fallen away from the Lord in their affection and in their action, even as they basked in the sunlight of God's rich mercy and grace shown unto them in so many ways. The mercies of God were not intended to make Israel comfortable in their sin, but were rather intended to drive them from their sin into the loving arms of God for forgiveness. As Paul says in Romans 2:4: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering: not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"

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