



“Confessing Our Sins”

Part II

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What does it mean to confess our sins? What does a true confession look like? We continue our look at one of the most famous confessions in the Bible recorded in **Ezra 9**. Let’s revisit that passage again.

Ezra 9:5-10 “And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day. And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. 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 Persia, 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. And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments...”

This is an incredible confession from the lips of Ezra. He was a priest and a scribe and in his role as a priest, he represented the people of God, and he offers this confession which, ultimately, led the people to repentance, to real change. Last week, we observed the attitude and content of his confession. Today, we’ll look more closely at the result of it. What does happen when we confess our sin? Is it enough that we simply admit that we have sinned? What if we even admit our sin with tears and shame as Ezra did. Today, we’ll see that there was more involved in this confession that Ezra offered to God.

The people of God spent seventy years in Babylonian captivity as a result of their sin. But God, in His grace and mercy finally allowed the people to return to their native homeland, the city of Jerusalem. After all these years, they were allowed to return to rebuild the toppled city walls and to reconstruct the temple, which had all been destroyed. The first wave of thousands of exiles returned, and they set about this work. You would think that seventy years in captivity would've taught them some lessons. You would think they'd have returned with humble hearts, very careful to do God's will and to refrain from sin at all cost. But, no. They immediately went headlong back into sin. They once again began to take wives from the pagan nations, which God strictly forbade. Make no mistake: that sin has gotten God's people in trouble in every age of time, and it continues to get some of God's people in trouble today. Well, they committed this sin again, and when word got to Ezra, he was just mortified, shocked, and speechless. He was vexed. The Bible tells us that he sat down and hung his head in shame and sorrow. He was so overcome that he couldn't say anything for much of the day. When he finally broke his silence, he began a tearful prayer of sorrow and contrition on behalf of the people.

Ezra 9:5 "And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God..."

Now, the evening sacrifice was the time when sacrifice was made for the people's sin. But Ezra understood that something must come before asking God for forgiveness, and that is a confession of sin. That was first in order. God had said this concerning people who had gone astray:

Leveiticus 26:40-42 "If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land."

God said there was a condition to forgiveness and that is the confession of sin. John later wrote to Christians saying this:

I John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

So, Ezra well understands that before God will forgive the people, the people must be willing to confess their sin. They've got to get rid of this awful iniquity that has now consumed them. We can learn a great deal about what a real confession is from the confession that Ezra made. Last week, we saw that Ezra was appalled by this sin.

Ezra 9:3 "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 understood what a serious thing the people had done. He understood that they had sinned and there was no other way to look at it. He didn't call it something else; he called it sin. Consequently, calling sin something besides sin doesn't make it something else. Sin is still sin. Calling fornication

something else doesn't make it *not* fornication. Calling adultery something else or watering it down with some nice, acceptable, palatable term doesn't make it any less of a sin.

Neither did Ezra do like many people do and try to rationalize or justify the people's sin. He didn't blame someone or something else for it. He didn't minimize it, call it a mistake or weakness or a shortcoming. He called it what it was: sin. He said their sin was so great, it had reached over their heads to the heavens (**Ezra 9:6**). Ezra continues:

Ezra 9:10 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments..."

You can't ask for a more open and honest confession and admission of sin than that. That's what confession is. I would point out again, as we learned last week, that the Greek word for *confession* is used in the New Testament and it means *to agree or to say the same thing as*. Many don't agree with God about their sin and that's why they won't confess their sin. They look at and treat their sin entirely differently than God does. Ezra not only plainly says that they had sinned, but he goes so far as to name the offenders one by one (**Ezra 10:18-44**). He calls them by name. He calls their sin by name. He calls their deed what it was, and that is sin. Iniquity. He is very open and forthright and he leads the people in confessing their sins to God by calling it what it is without alibi, without excuse, without rationalization. That's what confession of sin is. And, yes, that takes humility and courage, but that's what a confession of sin is all about.

Why did Ezra react so strongly to their sin? Why did he get so upset? He not only understood that they had blatantly done what God said not to do in His word, but they did it in the face of God's love and grace. Listen to what he tells them:

Ezra 9:8-9 "And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. 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 Persia, 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."

He basically says, *We're only here because God in His grace let us return. We didn't deserve to return here! We were being punished for our sin and we deserved to be punished for our sin! But God—undeservingly and graciously—gave us the opportunity to return to our land.* You know, all of us are the recipients of God's grace. All of us have received mercies from the Lord from day to day in our lives. We don't even deserve to live. We don't deserve the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, the clothes on our backs. The Bible says that God causes it to rain on the just AND on the unjust (**Matthew 5:45**). The blessings and mercies of God which He has undeservingly shown to all of us--regardless of where we may be spiritually today--should cause us to stop and think about how we react to God's blessings and how we treat God in the face of His grace. These people had returned by His gracious permission and plunged right back headlong into sin. Well, it was inexcusable.

Ezra 9:10-15 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments, Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness. Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your

sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever. And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this; Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldest not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this."

You'll never find a more clear and powerful example of a true confession of sin than what we just read. Was it enough for Ezra and the people to admit all of this? To simply admit to God that they had committed this sin? Were their tears and guilt and words enough to turn back God's wrath and to find His forgiveness? You know, some people will admit their sinful actions and perhaps be sorry for it and the mess that their actions have made.

But is that what Ezra's confession amounted to? No. Let's see what happened afterwards. We can see not only what confession consists of, but what it results in, and that is repentance. You see, a confession without repentance isn't really a confession. It doesn't do any good. It might let you get it off your chest and you might feel better to admit your sin, but it won't avail anything with God if it doesn't result in a change of course. Look at what happened when Ezra made his confession and what it led the people to do.

Ezra 10:1-2 "Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing."

Notice that they repeated Ezra's confession in just as specific terms. They didn't just say, *We've sinned*. They confessed and identified what the sin was.

Ezra 10:3 "Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law."

With that, Ezra gathered them all together and he goes on to say this:

Ezra 10:10-12 "And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do."

Now, this wasn't easy. But sometimes it takes extreme measures to repent of sin. You know, even today in this very context, there are Christians who violate the marriage vow through adultery. They divorce

and marry people that they have no scriptural right to marry because of the nature of the divorce to begin with. The Bible speaks to that in **Matthew 19:9**. John also told Herod that it was not lawful for him to have the woman he had (**Mark 6:18**). It was a relationship of which God did not approve. You know, there's only one way for such people to remedy that scriptural situation and that is to leave the sin. You say, *Well, won't God forgive it if I'm sorry?* Not if you're content to continue in it.

That's not only true of unscriptural marriage; that's true of ANY sin. If a person is living in immorality and that person wants God to forgive that immoral lifestyle, then that person has to forsake that immoral lifestyle. If a person or church is practicing false doctrine and unscriptural practices, they must not only confess the falsehood, but they've got to stop doing it as well and turn to that which is true and right. Is your worship unscriptural? Do you realize that your religion is not that which is described in the New Testament? Are you doing things that are not right and in accordance with the teachings of Christ and His apostles? Well, it's not enough to say, *I wish it weren't this way. I wish the church I'm going to would do differently.* You've got to stop that practice and turn away from it. Confession does no good and it's not a true confession if it doesn't involve repentance.

There's a good New Testament example of this kind of repentance recorded in **Acts 19**. You may recall that some vagabond Jews at Ephesus were falsely using the name of Jesus. They were merely imitating what they had seen Paul do and were trying to control demonic powers. They got into trouble. They had no business doing what they were doing, and an evil spirit attacked and wounded some of the men. That caused fear to grip the people of Ephesus and it stirred their hearts.

Acts 19:18-20 "And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed."

Now, there's a picture of true confession and repentance. When they realized that what they were doing was wrong, they confessed. They acknowledged that what they were doing was wrong, then they gave that sin up. They cleaned their houses of everything that was attached to the sin. They rid their lives completely of it. They wanted nothing more to do with it. You see, that's the picture of true confession and repentance, much like that of Ezra and the returned exiles in Jerusalem so long before. Merely admitting sin is not enough. True confession involves repentance, and that demands change. That's what many refuse to do. Nobody said it was easy. Confessing sin takes great courage.

Ezra 10:3-4 "Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it."

They understood that it was going to take courage for these people to do what they had to do. Do you have a hard time coming to grips with your sins? We struggle with that as human beings. Do you find it difficult or even impossible to say the words *I have sinned?* I've known people who just can't bring themselves to say it. It's been hard for me at times, especially to say to another person that I've wronged, *I have sinned against you.* Our pride gets in the way. We want to make excuses for it and water it down instead of just saying it. Our pride won't let us do it.

Sometimes our stubbornness gets in the way. The sin itself gets in the way and it's hard to give it up. Do you have the courage to do what is necessary to forsake the sin in which you live today and turn to the living God? Are you ready to let the Lord change the course of your life? You can and He can if you only have the courage and conviction to do so. But it takes a heart and attitude like that of Ezra. It takes the resolve of the prodigal son who said this:

Luke 15:18-19 "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

It takes a broken heart like that of David, who prayed with bitter tears after Nathan the prophet came unto him:

Psalm 51:1-4, 16-17 "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest...For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

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