

## Confession: Awakening Numb Hearts – Part 2

Ezra 9:6-15

**Introduction:** When my kids were little(er), they used to love watching for airplanes flying low as we made our way down to Irvine to visit my brother. There is a certain mystery and awe watching a hunk of metal hurdling through the sky with speed and precision. I grew up about 10 minutes from Oakland Airport, and we'd pass by this bustling monster everyday going to school. Even though planes would fly low overhead, the boom from engines would somehow never register in our ears. They became so commonplace that we no longer noticed the sight or sound of these flying behemoths over us. Familiarity meant we lost the sense of awe, and repetition numbed our sense of wonder. This is similar to our struggle with sin.

Now, it's important to answer a few questions that have been posed to me (good questions, not bad).

*Why focus on such a negative thing like confession of sin? Are we too hard on ourselves? Shouldn't we talk about something that leaves us feeling, I don't know, better about ourselves and life?*

I think it's fair to consider these. The **first** is simply that when we walk through texts of Scripture, the text drives the message, not us. The **second** is that we want to understand God wholly and worship Him completely, so dealing with our sin is essential. **Third**, confession and repentance is essential for our joy. As David said in **Psalm 32:3** *"For when I kept silent (about my sin) my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.* **Finally**, the message of Christmas IS the message of hope in the gospel which allows us to openly confess our sin so that we can receive forgiveness, restoration, and joy. In other words, we deal aggressively with our sin because we can, knowing that **we are NOT GOOD PEOPLE** trying to become better. We are desperately wicked and sinful people resting in the work of Jesus, not just His birth but His life, death, and resurrection which ALONE brought us new life. Consistent confession reminds us of this fact, keeping us humble, dependent, and willing to forgive others in the same way God in Christ forgave us (Eph. 4:32).

This morning we will look at a prayer of confession from the leader of Israel who came into a situation that after faithfully preaching God's Word found rampant sin among those who had returned. His response was not to be angry or to confront all the people and leadership, but to fall on his face and pray, confessing sin. This gives us a principled template and principles to understand how we too can practice confession on an ongoing basis.

### The Structure of a Prayer Confessing Sin

#### Acknowledgement of Sin (6-7)

**Ezra 9:5-7** And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, <sup>6</sup> saying: "O my God, I am **ashamed** and **blush** to lift my face to you, my God, for **our iniquities have risen higher than our heads**, and **our guilt** has mounted up to the heavens. <sup>7</sup> From the days of **our** fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for **our** iniquities we, **our** kings, and **our** priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter **shame**, as it is today.

#### No shifting of blame

The **first step of true confession** is acknowledging the depth of sin in transparent honesty. We are all prone to shift the blame of our sin, from blaming someone else (like Adam & Eve in Genesis 3), to

defending ourselves with caveats (“I did this, but it was because you did \_\_\_\_\_”), or with other self-justification (I was tired, frustrated, angry, etc). Notice that Ezra made no subtle or overt shifts away from acknowledging sins fullness – he was ashamed, blushed, and their **guilt & iniquities** rose to the heavens. This was seen in the story of the Prodigal God with the wayward son, upon seeing his Father uttered the words, *‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be your son.’* (Luke 15:21). No pretense. No excuses. No justification; simply an honest, humble, laid low admission of sin before a holy God.

### **Past to Present was the same – they all deserved the consequences**

Notice Ezra connects the present with the past, that sin was much less a force of **cultural pressure**, but something that transcended any particular location or time. Sin is a result of our born into depravity, and whenever the focus would be turned to self from God, there would be consequences. **Ezra did not speak of consequences in terms of God being unfair, but simply the righteous result of God dealing with sin.** This is an important factor in coming to grips with sin: the consequences we face are justified, even when forgiveness is present.

### **Recognizing God’s Goodness (8-9)**

**Ezra 9:8-9** But now for a brief moment **favor** has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a **remnant** and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our **God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving** in our slavery.<sup>9</sup> For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has **extended** to us his **steadfast love** before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

### **God’s Favor Seen – despite clear sin**

**The second step** of true confession is seeing God's character completely. When we adopt a full view of God - meaning God is not made up of parts but of the whole - that He is simultaneously holy and kind, angry and gracious, wrathful and merciful, we begin to see our lives in perspective. Instead of complaining about the captivity that his relatives faced, Ezra was reminded of the **favor God had on them** by bringing back a remnant. When we face the consequences of sin we can always see God's favor at the same time.

### **God’s Steadfast Love – despite present circumstances**

Now Ezra looked at their present circumstances where the ruling power of the world, Persia, sent this group back to Jerusalem to repair the Temple and worship. He spoke of this return not in terms of what was **deserved** but what was freely given. It almost seems like Ezra was incredulous concerning the sin of the people, like the son that receives chance after chance, despite constant failures, and each time finds a way to spoil the chance and blame others for the failure. God's extravagant love should keep us away from functioning from an **entitlement mentality**, knowing that our circumstances are always better than we deserve.

### **Recognition of Violation (10-12)**

**Ezra 9:10-12** "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For **we have forsaken your commandments**,<sup>11</sup> which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness.'<sup>12</sup> Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and **never seek their peace or**

**prosperity**, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'

### **God's commands were clear – as was the violation**

As we saw last week, the commands of God are always clear. He wanted the people to worship Him ALONE, to walk in holiness, being set apart from the culture around them. They were not to intermingle families of different religions, knowing this would move their heart away from their God. This was the command, and though it was clear, it was violated to extreme degrees.

### **Failure to stay pure, adopting cultural norms instead**

The people who returned had the best intentions (as we all do starting out), but had slowly chased after the **peace and prosperity** of the land and inhabitants around them. This was a battle of **values and worship**: God's values of worship have to do with **faith in the present and hope of the future**, both of which are NOT seen now. When we live in a culture, we get to see, taste, and touch the wealth and comfort of those who are ONLY living for the "now". It becomes a temptation to want what everyone else has, neglecting the most important things which are by nature unseen (see 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). This is a core battle: do we see pursuit of Christ as our highest value and greatest pleasure, or do we pursue the peace and prosperity that our neighbors are seemingly enjoying now?

### **Plea for God's Mercy (13-15)**

**Ezra 9:13-15** And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, **have punished us less than our iniquities deserved** and **have given us such a remnant as this**,<sup>14</sup> shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be **angry** with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?<sup>15</sup> O LORD the God of Israel, you are **just**, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this."

### **A perfect picture of Mercy & Grace**

This is perhaps one of my favorite examples of a definition of a request for mercy and grace from God. Because there was NOTHING in the goodness and morality of the people by which to appeal to God, the ONLY basis was of God's character. **Mercy** is seen in "God punished them less than they deserved" and **Grace** is that He had **given** them an undeserved remnant. Our appeal to God in confession is always based on these two factors: God be merciful to me, a sinner, and withhold what I truly deserve, and be gracious to me, a sinner, and give me what I never could earn, forgiveness and restoration of my relationship with you.

### **Appeal Based on God's Character**

Ezra ended this prayer with acknowledging God's **anger and justice**, two components of His nature that we shiver at and some are repulsed by, but are inseparable from His love and compassion. Ezra appealed finally NOT on the basis of the goodness of man, which we still fight to believe and argue God should accept us because of what **we've done**, and instead simply threw Himself and the nation at God's feet with the hope that God would exercise the same grace and mercy as He had done before.

### **The Principles of Praying to Confess Sin**

Now, what do we learn practically from this outline? How do we begin to practice what Ezra did so eloquently before God? Let's look at several implications, starting with barriers to confession:

### **Barriers to Confession**

Why are we so hesitant to admit and confess our sin? I remember growing up that part of the service was a silent prayer of confession that we did EVERY Sunday, recognizing our constant need of forgiveness and cleansing. Why don't we practice this as much in public or private?

#### ***Numb***

The effects of sin create numbness, like when my brother used to hit my arm until I couldn't feel it anymore. Sin offers pleasure and satisfaction, and then **delivers**, for a time until we need more and more and feel the pleasure less and less. This is the basis of **addiction**, and it is safe to say we are all sin-addicts, these addictions simply manifest themselves differently. This is why we **FEEL** that it is impossible to stop a certain sin, since it has been so habitual and ingrained.

#### ***Dumb***

We've said this before, but a quick definition of the result of sin in our life: **Sin will make you stupid**, or at the very least act stupid, or think stupid (yes, I did want to say the word "stupid" three times in service, and yes I will hear about it later). Sin dumbs us down in three ways:

**Ignorance** - This is when a follower of Jesus simply does not know Scripture, ignorant to a call of holiness or even what makes up a holy life. Ignorance for a believer is not bliss and it is not acceptable nor is it necessary, since God has made Himself known in His Word.

**Selfishness** - This is when we are so deceived into thinking that we **NEED** the sin we commit. Men that think they need to indulge in lust because that is how they have been physiologically made, or women who think that gossip is simply the way we communicate (and many, many others) show that we have a misunderstanding of sin and holiness. "This is who I am" or "This is how I was born" are not acceptable answers to continuing in sin.

**Fear** - There is an unhealthy fear of the Lord and people that keep us away, too little of one and too much of the other. We forget that God sees, knows, and accounts for all things, internal sin, sins of omission, and those things that are done in isolation, and He is the One that can kill us and punish us eternally (Matt. 10:28). But somehow we are ok if He knows. Its people that we are overly concerned about, and we are afraid that somehow people will find out the truth: that we are NOT as perfect as we appear on Sunday, or in public, or on Facebook.

**When we are more afraid of what people think than what God thinks, confession of sin will always be minimal.**

### **Basics of Confession**

1. God makes ethical demands – of which we fall short
2. God's righteousness requires punishment for sin – temporal and eternal, and for Israel, this meant that they would even suffer at the hands of foreign nations
3. God is merciful, forgiving sin and making provision for salvation and restoration through the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. This does not mean we will not experience consequences of sin temporally, but can be restored relationally with Him.

#### ***To Whom***

**God** - We confess to God (see Psalm 51:4) because He is the One who forgive cleanses us of our sin (1 John 1:9), because Jesus has satisfied God's demands and Advocates for us before the Father (1 John 2:1-3).

**Others**- We confess our sin to others if we have wounded or sinned against them (Matt. 5:23-24; James 5:16). Remember, no person can give absolution to our sin (confessing to me does nothing in regards to God's standards), but often being honest about sin with others makes it real. In other words, God alone forgives in Christ, but if we have sinful habits, we can become too comfortable with "only" God knowing, and allowing others to know keeps us accountable.

### ***Solidarity***

**Personal vs. Corporate** - Notice back in the text of Ezra 9:6 that Ezra was first appalled by the sin he saw around him, and he used personal nouns to express this: "I am ashamed", "my face to you my God", but then quickly turned to plural nouns "we, our, us". In other words, our sin is never encapsulated to ourselves. Our sin affects the whole. A fathers sin affects his family. A sons sin his parents. A member of this church affects us all. That is why we deal with our sin so aggressively and graciously. We want to see everyone walk in joy, so we want to help everyone deal with their sin.

### ***Role of Leadership***

**Brokenness and Compassion** (as compared to Nehemiah 13:25) - This is one of my favorite pictures. Ezra responded to the sin of his family by falling on his face and praying for forgiveness. The leader who followed named Nehemiah took a different tact when he found out about intermarriage a few decades later, "***And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of the them and pulled out their hair, and I made them take an oath in the name of God.***" Yikes. The Bible does not say this was wrong per se, but the response of Ezra seemed to be affective without yanking out beards.

**Unity by entering in** - Ezra was a true leaders. He did not wag a finger in the face of the people, but entered into the process of restoration. He did not engage in the sin himself, but a good leader still accepts responsibility. After being appalled, he then asked for God to forgive them all, including himself, even though he was unblemished in the sin.

Fathers and husbands, do you take the lead in confession in your home? Do you confess your own sin to your wife, or do you wait for her to initiate? Have you admitted sin to your kids? Have we asked for God's grace and mercy for our kids, knowing that God holds leaders responsible and we then function in dependency on God working?

Pastors, elders, shepherding group leaders, volunteers, and servants here, are we leading in the confession of sin, weeping and rejoicing with others who are battling sin?

### **Benefits of Confession**

We leave this morning at the hope in confession, from Psalm 51, which we read publically last week. This was king David's response of confession after he committed adultery, lied, and killed many to cover up the sin, all of which would have required his death and loss of crown. But God was gracious to him and let him live and remain king, though the consequences were heavy the rest of his life (see 2 Samuel 12:10-18 for a list). But David never railed against these consequences, but after an admission of sin and plea on the basis of God's character, here is what he found:

### **Restoration**

**Of Joy** - *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (12)* - This was what was missing, and this is what David craved. For almost a year he kept his sin hidden, and all the while felt like his "bones were broken" (8).

**Of Relationship** - *"Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."* - Sin brought a break in true relationship. Yes he still functioned as king, went through motions of worship, and lead the people, but it was all artificial. There is no ongoing, functional, practical relationship with God when we continue on in our sin, so David asked for a clean heart and right spirit so that he could once again taste the sweetness of a relationship with God. This is imperative for our relationship with God, and gives us **potential** to be restored in relationship with each other, no matter the sin.

### **Motivation**

**In Evangelism** - What was the result? *"Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you."* (13) Do you want motivation to tell people about Jesus? Be restored truly from your sin! When we have tasted of God's forgiveness and restoration, we cannot help but tell others of how to experience the same thing.

**In Worship** - *"my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare praise."* (14-15). What is the result of confession and restoration of sin? An unquenchable desire to offer praise and worship to God. This means we do not worship out of sentimentality or tradition, out of preference or external rhythm, but out of a heart that has been cleansed and a life made pure.

So this Christmas, especially, have we tasted this kind of forgiveness and restoration? Have we disciplined ourselves to confess our sin since our greatest value and joy is to be in a true relationship with God? This is the message of Christmas, because this is the message of the gospel, that Jesus has atoned for our sin on the cross, sacrificing Himself so that God looks at us through His righteousness, and that we have been given Christ righteousness to deal with our sin every day.