

## Prayer Letter 5

Excerpts from the book "Spiritual Warfare through Intercession" (chapter 12)

### Ezra – Intercessor for a Nation

Read Ezra chapters 9 and 10. The following references are all to the book of Ezra unless specifically stated otherwise.

#### **Background** (about 457 BC)

Although the Babylonian captivity of Judah had now ended and the rebuilding of the Temple was complete, the people had sinned by intermarrying with heathen races rather than separating themselves from them and their abominations. Moreover, the officials and leaders (priests and Levites) had been the chief offenders (9:1-2).

Ezra was a scribe, skilled in the Law (7:6) and a priest (10:16). When he realised the seriousness of the situation, he sat appalled by it and was joined by all those who feared God (9:3-4). He then fasted and interceded for his people.

#### **1. Ezra humbled himself before God** (9:3-5)

All true prayer is humbling, because it recognises our weakness and inability, and God's greatness and ability. To pray is to 'beg', beseech or plead with, which implies that the person praying is 'inferior' to the one being prayed to (e.g., Matthew 18:23-35; Luke 18:1-8).

#### **2. Ezra fasted and prayed** (9:3-5)

The Hebrew word for "fasted" is very similar in meaning to the words for "afflicted" and "humbled" (see Leviticus 23:26-32; Ezra 8:21-23; 9:5; 2 Chronicles 7:14). Ezra sought the Lord with real earnestness, humbling and affliction of the body, soul and spirit – he meant business!

#### **3. Ezra recognised God's greatness, holiness and majesty** (9:5b-6)

He saw the Lord God – Who He is! (cf. John's vision in Revelation 1:9-20).

#### **4. Ezra identified with the sins of his people** (9:6-7)

As a result of seeing the Lord's holiness, he saw their sin and was ashamed; then he repented and confessed their sin. (cf. Isaiah 6:1-7). Ezra not only confessed the sins

as his own, but he also confessed the sins of his people, asking God for forgiveness on behalf of them all.

Note that while Ezra prayed, he used the plural words “we” and “our”, not “I” and “my” (9:6-15). To intercede is to go between. The intercessor prays on behalf of some other person or people, pleading for mercy on their behalf. Hence the intercessor must first repent and confess his own sin before he confesses the sins of others. “Judgement begins with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). We need to get our own individual lives right first, then the Church, and then we can reach out to the nation. How can we effectively bind evil spirits, evil rulers and authorities, and pray against sins and wickedness in our society, if these things are still in our own hearts and lives?

**5. Ezra acknowledged that God had blessed, in spite of their sins (9:8-9)**

How gracious and merciful God is! How He longs to bless! Often when we least deserve and expect it, He blesses us. This is not to condone sin, but to demonstrate His mercy and love (Romans 5:8).

**6. Ezra made specific confession of sin (9:10-15)**

He acknowledged the rightness of God’s commands, and their failure to obey them. If we are to be forgiven and cleansed from sin then we must be specifically aware of that sin, repentant over it, confess it specifically and receive God’s forgiveness. Then we can be sure of forgiveness. The problem with general confession is that it is easy to fall back into those same sins again. See 1 John 1:9 and Romans 8:1-4.

**7. Ezra cast himself on God’s mercy, forgiveness and love, pleading with God not to punish them as they deserved (9:8-9).**

He acknowledged God’s justice and their unworthiness, pleading for God’s forgiveness (9:15). The Bible gives us some beautiful pictures of what God does with our sin once it is forgiven: see Psalm 103:10-12; Isaiah 38:17; Jeremiah 31:34; Micah 7:19; 1 John 1:7, 9. Praise God!

**8. Ezra reminded God of His promises, and their inheritance, having first fulfilled God’s conditions of seeking Him with true repentance (9:11-12).**

We do not need to “claim” promises from God – all we need to do is to obey their conditions and allow God to fulfill them! After all, He is always faithful to His Word.

**9. Ezra and the people wept bitterly over their sin (10:1)**

This was not emotionalism, but the right and proper use of emotions to express deep repentance of heart over their sin. It is not wrong for emotions to be used in worship, repentance, etc., as long as they are genuine and not emotionalism for emotion's sake.

Balance is, of course, required. We can control our emotions, and they should not offend others or take their attention away from the Lord or from prayer.

Emotions run high at sports events; why not for the King of kings? Human love involves emotions; why not our love for God? Someone has said, "All Word and no Spirit and we will freeze up. But all Spirit and no Word and we will blow up!"

### **10. Their repentance was shown by a change of behaviour (10:3-17)**

This is the fruit of genuine repentance. Compare with 1 John 1:7 "If we walk in the light ... the Blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin". The people promised to stop sinning and to obey God's commands (10:2-5). Anyone who refused to obey was to be cut off from amongst God's people (10:6-8). The people then confessed their sin and sanctified themselves (10:9-14). This was done in depth, not superficially (10:13b). God's fierce wrath was averted because of their repentance, and the matter was finally put right (10:16-17).

### **The Results**

About 12 years later (445 BC), Nehemiah and others had returned from captivity and rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem. Many thousands of exiles had returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem, and Ezra continued his work of reform, teaching the Word and the ways of the Lord to the people.

Read **Nehemiah chapters 9 and 10** (the following references are to these chapters). As a result of Ezra's teaching, the people fasted, confessed their sins and those of their fathers, and sanctified themselves (9:1-2). For six hours they read God's Word (Law) and for another six hours they confessed their sins and worshipped the Lord (9:3-5).

In Ezra's prayer he again:

- (a) acknowledged God's greatness (9:6)
- (b) remembered God's dealings with Israel – His promises, blessings and judgements (9:7-15)
- (c) remembered that in spite of God's blessings and Israel's disobedience, God is merciful and did not forsake them (9:16-25). Because of repeated disobedience and blasphemies, God allowed them to be captured and to suffer under their enemies, yet when they cried to God He heard them and saved them. This cycle was repeated over and over again: disobedience, punishment, repentance and

forgiveness. Nevertheless, God did not destroy them or utterly forsake them, for He is gracious and merciful (9:26-31).

(d) God is just, patient and merciful (9:32-35).

(e) Ezra remembered their promised inheritance which they were not enjoying because of their sin (9:36-38).

### **The People's Response**

As a result of Ezra's preaching of God's Word and of his intercessions, the people promised to walk in God's ways and obey His laws (10:28-39)

- Not to intermarry with the heathen (unbelievers), but to remain separate (sanctified)
- To remember the Sabbath day (the day of rest) and keep it holy.
- To keep the sacrifices.
- To give of their first-fruits.
- To tithe.
- Not to neglect the House of the Lord.

What an example for us today!

### **QUESTIONS**

1. When and why should we fast?
2. How do we "identify with the sins of our nation"?
3. Must repentance in the Church precede repentance in the nation?
4. How can God be merciful without condoning sin?
5. What can we, as intercessors, learn from Ezra's example?
6. Is it really possible for a nation – our nation – to turn to God in true repentance and "be healed" (2 Chronicles 7:14)? How could this happen?