

True Confessions, Part I

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part XI

Ezra 9

Introduction

Standing in the grocery store line recently, I was surrounded by magazines and tabloids. I noticed that several of them included the word “confession”. They said such things as, “So and so confesses to secret love; so and so confesses to secret abuse; so and so confesses to fantasy life; etc.”

These people, and others like them, who hire writers to tell us about their immoralities and infidelities are not interested in confessing, they are interested in royalties. Furthermore, when a person confesses to a counselor or psychologist, he does not necessarily want forgiveness, he may just want to feel better.

We happen to live in a guilt ridden society, that is desperately in need of forgiveness. They are unable to experience it, however, because they do not know how to truly confess anything.

I found it interesting to read of two separate companies who are capitalizing on guilt. One company will, for a modest fee, allow you to talk to one of their telephone personnel and confess whatever you want to confess. Another company will actually go and confess or apologize to whomever you want. They will do it for you.

I also read about an enterprising priest who has developed a web page where people can confess online.

The truth about true confession is that it does not have anything to do with the Internet, it cannot be done for you by somebody else, and it cannot be done on the telephone to somebody you do not even know.

So, what is true, biblical confession? How does it work? What does it say? How do we feel? What changes as a result of confession? Why do we need to do it if God already knows what we have done?

I want to begin by reading the following definition of confession. I have attempted to include, in this definition, every facet of biblical confession that takes the believer from the very first step.

*Confession: to **simply admit** unfaithfulness to God through your specific sinful thoughts and actions; to **totally agree** with God’s point of view regarding your thoughts and actions as inexcusable; to **humbly accept** any consequences brought about by those thoughts and actions; to **diligently act** in renewed faithfulness toward your gracious, forgiving God.*

This, ladies and gentlemen, is true confession. How do I know? Because it has come directly from what we will study today – the life and times of an Old Testament believer named Ezra. Ezra models confession, not only for his own generation, but for every generation of believer after him.

Let us begin with chapter 9, verses 1 and 2.

Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some

of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.”

Their sin is that the people have intermarried with the pagan nations around them. But it is a bigger problem than marrying unbelievers, it is a threat to the very core of what makes them a holy nation and to the purpose God had in mind for this nation.

Warren Wiersbe reminded me, in his writings, that the Jews were not called a “holy nation” because they inherently were holy. They were chosen by God and set apart to do His will. And it would be through Israel, God had said in Genesis, chapter 12, verse 3, that,

. . . all families of the earth shall be blessed.

Has that come about? Yes! Through the Jews the world has been given three wonderful gifts:

1. the knowledge of the true and living God,
2. the written scriptures – you have a Bible, inspired by God through Jewish writers,
3. and, most significantly, from the tribe of Judah, a little boy would be born, who was directly related to King David through a pure ancestral line, whose name was Jesus Christ – the Jewish people gave us the Messiah.

So, to intermarry violates and threatens the long plans of God. It also threatens the immediate well-being of people now exposed and vulnerable to idolatry. Malachi informs us that many of these Jewish men actually divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry pagan women. They, like Solomon before them, were now on the downward slope that led from compromise into idolatry.

If you notice the last phrase of verse 2 again, you discover the potential of ungodly influence. We read that,

. . . the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.

The top leaders of the nation were corrupt. And, their evil influence had opened the floodgates of immorality and the accommodation of idolatry. There is great sin in Jerusalem.

The Ingredients of True Confession

It is at this moment that you and I are given a glimpse of true confession. Ladies and gentlemen, when God wants to teach some deep truth, He often illustrates the truth rather than dictating it. Ezra provides for us, by the illustration of his own life, the ingredients of true confession.

Admission

1. The first word I want to give to you as an ingredient is, admission.

Look at verses 3 and 4.

And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

Look further, at the last phrase of verse 6, to find out the way Ezra refers to this sin.

. . . for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

The mark of false confession is to downplay the sin. “Lord, I know I did such and such, but everybody does it. Lord, you know that little white lie I told – I’m sorry. Lord, please forgive me for sort of messing up a little bit lately.”

That is false confession.

In other words, Ezra says, “Lord our guilt has grown into this huge pile that now reaches heaven. It is sin upon sin, crime upon crime, abomination upon abomination, perversion upon perversion. We are guilty of this huge mountain of sin.”

He calls it what God calls it. Go back to the definition of confession, it,

. . . simply admits to unfaithfulness to God . . . and totally agrees with God’s point of view regarding thoughts and actions as inexcusable . . .

True confession admits sin. It lays bare, before God, sinful actions and, further still, a sinful heart. It exposes motives instead of covering them up.

Look at verse 7.

Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of 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, and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.

There are three words in that verse that help us to discover what it means to really admit sin: shame, iniquities, and great guilt.

Recently, a man told me about an experience he had had, that we both shared, of the strange feeling of standing in traffic court. Even though it was for a traffic ticket, he told me it was still a really moving and convicting moment to stand in front of people and the judge and say the word, “Guilty.”

True confession says, “Lord, I’m guilty!”

When was the last time you heard anybody say, “I’m guilty”?

The truth is, we learn at a very young age how to avoid the admission of guilt. Right?!

Like the little six-year-old girl, I read about, who was often guilty of lying. Her parents gave her a St. Bernard dog for her birthday. It was not long before she had told all of the neighbors that she had been given her very own lion. Her mother took her aside and said, “I’ve told you not to lie. Now I want you to go upstairs and tell the Lord that you are sorry and promise God that you will not lie again.”

The little girl went upstairs, said her prayers, and came back down again. Her mother asked, “Did you tell God what you did?”

The girl replied, “Yes Ma’am, I did. And God told me that sometimes He finds it hard to tell my dog from a lion too.”

True confession does not rationalize sin, does not deny it, does not minimize it, does not excuse it, and does not say it is not there!

But, like C. S. Lewis, who wrote of his own self-examination, the biblical confessor says,

I discovered within me a zoo of lust, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.

True confession admits it.

But, there is a second element to true confession.

Aversion

2. There is not only admission of sin, there is also aversion to sin!

Look at Ezra’s response again in verse 3 and in the last phrase of verse 4,

And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of

the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled . . . and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

That Hebrew word “appalled” means, “to be horrified; to be shocked; to be astonished by sin.”

Everyone else accepted it. No one else was tearing their clothes and plucking out their beards. Sure, there were other people upset by it, but only Ezra was appalled by it.

Why? Because they had, for a generation, accommodated it; they had allowed for it and excused it. They let their daughters and sons date the Hittites and the Perizzites next door, while telling themselves that they were really nice boys and girls, if you just look past their idolatry. But then, they married them and moved the idols into their apartments and their condos, saying, “It’s no big thing, man, relax!”

By the time Ezra arrived, the remnant was about to be pulled out by the riptide and did not even know it.

Ladies and gentlemen, the first step to no longer being shocked by sin in your life is taken when you are no longer shocked by sin in someone else’s life.

The aftermath of school shootings has caused an evaluation of the violence in movies and video games. Expert psychologists have traced real life murder to the exposure of fantasy murder in the games. They now admit that observing violence sets the stage for acting out violence.

Many people have said, “Yeah, those teenagers have really gotten hooked on movie violence, video game violence, and violent themes in music. I’m not surprised some of them are actually doing it.”

Then when is the adult world going to be bright enough to apply the same principle to its own music and to its own movies and television? We are no longer shocked by sin; in fact, we accept it being played out before our very own eyes?! What have we to teach the younger generation? In the grown-up world, we give Oscars to adulterers.

Fifty years ago, the show, “I Love Lucy,” about two married people, was produced by the world – and the world would not allow Lucy and Ricky to be on the same bed at the same time. They each had their own twin bed, separated by a night stand. Oh, but are we not more sophisticated now? No, we are not sophisticated, we are sinful.

Listen to Jeremiah speak, in chapter 8, verse 12,

Were they ashamed because of the abomination they had done? They certainly were not ashamed, and they did not know how to blush . . .

Listen to Ezra, in verses 5 and 6,

But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God; and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee . . ."

Would you like to start a revolution for a month and see what happens? Turn off any television show and walk out of any Broadway production or movie theater that shows or implies sexual relations between two unmarried people, or between a married person with someone other than the person to whom he, or she, is married. The biblical names for that are fornication and adultery. Apply that to books, magazines, and music as well. Do not even look at it. Do not get emotionally pulled into the scene.

Why? Because just as video violence sets the stage for real live violence, so media immorality sets the stage, whets the appetite, and prepares the table for real live immorality.

And, the proof that you are already in danger is that you are no longer appalled by it. You have lost your sense of shame.

Awareness

3. True confession involves admission; it includes aversion; and, thirdly, it brings awareness of God's grace!

Five Images of Grace

In this great prayer of confession, Ezra recalls and verbalizes five images of grace.

A remnant

Notice, in verse 8, the first image of grace.

But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant . . .

The first image of grace is a "remnant". In other words, "Even though we have been so sinful, God has allowed a few of us to live in Jerusalem."

A peg

The second image follows, in verse 8,

. . . and to give us a peg in His holy place . . .

The image is that of a peg being driven into the ground. That speaks of security and stability. They are in the land – driven there by the grace of God.

A light

Then the word "enlightenment" captures the image of light for one's eyes. Continue in verse 8.

. . . that our God may enlighten our eyes . . .

They were not left in the darkness of bondage, they were given a new day with light with which to walk.

A reviving

Further in the verse, they also experienced a "little reviving". We read,

. . . and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

This is a picture of being brought back to life.

A wall

Then finally, in verse 9, the last phrase speaks of a wall in Judah and Jerusalem, saying,

. . . and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

It is the image of protection that they have received from a gracious God.

In other words, true confession magnifies the awfulness of our sin and, at the same time, it magnifies the grace of our God.

The person who is not truly confessing does the opposite to both – he minimizes his sin and minimizes the need for God's grace. "It's not that big a deal!"

May I go on to say that one of the blessings of true confession is that it gives you, not only a fresh view of your sinfulness, but also a fresh view of your Savior.

True confession involves admission, but admission is not enough. It includes aversion, but aversion to sin is not enough. It brings an awareness of grace, but an awareness of grace is not enough. True confession involves more than this. We will discover it in our next study in Ezra.

Application

Rearranging Our Understanding

Here are three thoughts to rearrange our perspective on the subject of confession:

1. Confession is an opportunity to remind ourselves that our choices do not bring fulfillment.
2. Confession is a reminder that we are not satisfied with delighting in Christ.

Confession is not so much in saying, “O Lord, help me to overcome materialism,” but, “O Lord, cause me to enjoy You more than anything I could ever own.”

Confession is not so much in saying, “O Lord, take away my sinful craving,” but, “O Lord, give me a craving for You.”

Isn't confession nothing more than a reminder that we were not totally satisfied with God?

3. Confession is a need, not so much because we broke a commandment of God, but because we broke the heart of God.

The apostle Paul, in dealing with sinful believers in Corinth, did not take them through an exposition of the Ten Commandments. Frankly, he did not need to, they knew them by heart. But, what he did do, was plead with them with an argument that went like this, “Listen, Christians, have you forgotten that your body is the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit? Your body is carrying God around and, when you engage in sin, you take God with you. How grieved He must be to endure the presence of sin and the unfaithfulness of his son or daughter.”

Sin violates God; it abuses God; it hurts and grieves God. The believer who sins and then goes before God with true embarrassment, true shame, and true guilt, recognizing the hurt and dishonor he has brought to his gracious God, can experience true confession. And, he can discover, in the process, His Lord, Who, in spite of the sin, stands ready to forgive and forget.

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