

WE STAND BEFORE YOU IN OUR GUILT

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

Judas Iscariot came to a terrible end—alone, disgraced, dead by his own hand. He defied the love and righteousness of God and sold the Messiah to executioners for a handful of silver coins. He didn't, however, set out to be a villain and traitor. He became one gradually. John made this observation about him: "But one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray [Jesus], objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:4-6).

Judas spent most of three years with Jesus, being loved, encouraged, and taught by him. Yet all during that time, with such a great opportunity to appreciate the presence and love of God, he managed to take money for himself, with an increasingly seared conscience. He became harder and harder in his thinking. Finally the day came when the opportunity to betray the Lord to death was before him, and he took it. Judas became a villain and traitor over time by choices of compromise that changed his character.

We might make the same observation about toxins in the environment. The contamination of drinking water that causes cancer and birth defects doesn't happen in a moment. It occurs over time as economic decisions by individuals and corporations result in dumping of chemicals onto the ground and into streams, which leads finally to deadly outcomes. Such short-term economic advantage seems like a good idea at the moment, but it leads finally to a deadly environmental problem.

Probably most of us experience pressure to turn our backs on God and listen to the opportunities afforded us by the world at times. Most of us have that option every day. The question we might raise, therefore, is what weapon we have to fight incipient compromise, small choices of wickedness that lead to large outcomes. Well, the great weapon for people of faith is confession of sin. We have come now to a prayer in which confession is central. We will hear Ezra lead his people in clearly and thoughtfully naming sin in the presence of God.

Unfaithfulness to God

Let's begin with Ezra 9:1-4, and I'll explain the context.

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness."

When I [Ezra] heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Ezra wrote this sometime around 450 B.C., four or five months after he returned to Jerusalem. Israel's sin had led to captivity. For seventy years the people of God remained in exile until God allowed some to go back and repopulate Jerusalem and the surrounding area. That occurred about eighty years before this book was written. Over time additional groups of exiles went back to the Promised Land and attempted to worship God in the place he had commanded. The returnees had a very difficult time of it. There never was enough money, and there were always threats of danger and seductive pressures from their neighbors.

Raised in Babylon under Persian authority, Ezra came to Jerusalem bringing money, political connections, and new spiritual leadership. He came to be a blessing to the struggling returnees. Ezra is succinctly described this way: "Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). He was a man who loved the truth, studied it, lived it, and taught it to other people. So when he arrived, he began to teach and to encourage worship. Now four or five months into that process, he learned of the faith-destroying practice of intermarriage that was widespread and growing worse.

Let's consider the problem that caused such consternation for Ezra (and others). If we apply the modern concepts of racism and xenophobia, we will misunderstand the issue here. The concern that God's people not intermarry with the other peoples had nothing to do with genetic superiority. This wasn't a case of disrespecting the basic human dignity of the surrounding peoples. And it wasn't a challenge to the Biblical command to love and serve one's neighbors.

Moses had told God's people, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a context Ezra will quote in his prayer, "The LORD did not set his affections on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7). There was nothing special about them as a people. Rather, God chose them in order to give them a gift that they could give away to others, in order to use them to win the world. The reference to the holy race, the concern about separation from the surrounding peoples, and the particular concern about not intermarrying with the other peoples, all had to do with loyalty to the covenant God had made with the children of Israel. The issue was holiness, loyalty to God himself in belief and practice, a willingness to reject idolatry.

We are not being given any insight here about the nature of marriage. The Scriptures teach a great deal about whom you should choose to marry, and about the nature of marriage—servant-hearted love, two becoming one, giving up one's rights for one's beloved, and more. This passage is not about the nature of marriage, but of the failure of parents.

In Ezra's world parents were using their children as bargaining chips, making deals with members of surrounding peoples for their own economic benefit, perhaps for political advantage, and so on. Parents were arranging marriages in order to form alliances. But the alliances were opening the door to the worship of other gods. This was a matter in which Israel had failed so often in the past, and now they were beginning once again to invite the influence of idols.

Immediate benefits, long-term costs

Let's think about idolatry itself for a moment before we look at the content of Ezra's confession. What would replace loyalty to the Lord for you and me?

Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24). You cannot trust and derive life from financial advantage, and trust and derive life from God at the same time. Fame, success, sex, education, even family can all be idolatry if we are not careful. Recall the Lord's words, hard to hear but important: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me..." (Matthew 10:37). Our Lord is a jealous God who calls us to put him first so that he can bless us. He alone is worthy of first place, of worship as God.

The attention we give to gaining pleasure can draw us into little compromises that over time turn us into people we never intended to be. The thrill of success and competition, whatever the cost, may change our hearts in ways that will horrify us at some point. What might we learn from the incident in the Little League World Series, in which adults, perhaps for the sake of regaining their own lost youth, or competition at all costs, took advantage of their own sons, lying about the age of one of the players because the team needed him in order to win? What do we learn from somebody like Gary Condit, in his arrogance, and then from all the voyeurs who pursue him relentlessly? The seductions of idolatry are not confined to their ancient forms.

The benefits of choosing a voice other than God's are immediate. The consequences come in the long term. So we fool ourselves by thinking about what we get now and not considering where it's leading. Judas became a traitor by first being a small-stakes crook.

The weapon that we use to fight back against spiritual compromise is, again, confession, or agreeing with what the Bible says is true about ourselves. It's saying aloud, repeatedly, that we turn from what's wrong. If we learn to confess sin as we are instructed, we'll be strengthened and set on the right path as we really long to be.

Let's read Ezra's prayer, and then we'll make some observations about it. Verses 5-15:

Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed:

"O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

"But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

"But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your

daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship [alliance] with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'

What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

Uncompromising confession of real guilt

The first observation we can make is that Ezra didn't organize a campaign to make changes or lecture anybody; in fact, he fell silent for an entire day. He lamented in prayer without words to begin, and later after some others had gathered to him, he prayed with very thoughtful words. I have much to learn from this. When I learn about a problem, my tendency is to want to do something about it—to organize an intervention. But the most powerful thing we can do is pray: draw near to God, pour out our hearts before him, receive what he will give us, depend on him rather than try to make things happen.

Further, we might observe the defining characteristic of the people who joined Ezra in his prayer: "everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel." It was everyone who had already received the truth of the Scriptures, everyone who listened carefully to and believed the things that God had said. Those people were motivated to call sin "sin," to speak of it openly and hopefully in God's presence. Those who defend compromise, who are increasingly comfortable with idolatrous choices and approval of half-gods and distance from the Lord, are also those who don't listen much to the Scriptures. They find it harder and harder to hear the words of God. Those who respect and tremble at the words of God will speak clearer words of confession.

We are told in the beginning of chapter 9 that it was the leaders of the people who got them into this mess; those who should have known better began the practice of bargaining with their children for advantage in society. Yet those who led them out also deserve credit. Ezra had been in Jerusalem only four or five months, yet he prayed with clear identification with the people who had failed. He used the words "we" and "our" and "us." He joined with them in their need.

We can learn something from observing how strong Ezra's language is. "Our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens." He was saying, "Our case is desperate! We have no grounds for any appeal at all." We should assume that the problem of intermarrying had not yet gone so far that it was leading to obvious evil consequences. The influence of this kind of situation is subtle, and it takes time to develop. Ezra had been in the community in Jerusalem for four or five months, and he hadn't even been aware of the problem until someone came and told him about it. There weren't prophets of Baal or Ashtoreth on every hill or widespread practice of the twisted Canaanite religion with all its perversion and violence. But Ezra was using very strong language because turning to half-gods from the true God is sinful at the beginning as well as later. He was saying, "We are in fact as guilty now as we'll feel when the consequences are obvious." Guilt is not the same as guilt feelings. When circumstances get really bad and we hate our life and we turn to God because our failure and guilt feelings are so painful, all we're doing then is agreeing with him about the problem that has been true all along.

We can observe repeated references to bondage and slavery. “Generation after generation in the past,” he was saying, “we have chosen our own slavery to sin.” Ezra knew history well enough to know that human nature is always the same. Consider how idolatry persuades us: it almost always offers us immediate freedom or power or pleasure. But the eventual outcome is slavery. When we listen to the voice of the idol, what we are doing is putting chains in place that will one day control us and our destiny.

Verse 9 speaks of the generous response of the Persian rulers. There is a subtle point here: we sometimes think that if we are more like the folks in the world, if we don’t have too much of an edge to our faith, if we aren’t peculiar and insistent and narrow, if we somehow go along with people more, we will be more likely to win unbelievers over. But Ezra’s life is an argument for exactly the opposite. The reason that the Persian kings eventually gave the exiles hope and opportunity and blessing was because people like Daniel (see Discovery Papers #4700 - #4710) and Ezra refused to compromise. Those who actually have the most influence on unbelievers are those who are truest to their faith. The world needs Christians to be Christian, to be different. It’s a dark place, and somebody needs to be carrying the light. Dimming the light as we move toward others in darkness does them no good and certainly does us no good.

The prayer of Ezra with others gathered to him ends on a note of conviction. There is no statement that something good is going to come from this. But clearly, he is not giving a lecture to anybody else, he is speaking to God. And the very act of speaking to God assumes that God will listen and respond. So underneath is the influence of hope.

In Christ we can be clearer in our reasons for hope. As Ezra did, we honestly confess sins because we are doing battle with compromise and idolatry. We name things as they are in the presence of God in order to not be deceived. We pray in community because we need the help of others around us. But we do so with the certainty that God has already received us. Our Savior has paid the price for us.

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