



## Introduction

Last Sunday morning, as part of our ongoing study of what the Bible teaches us about prayer — about our heart—to—heart conversations with God — we looked at the prayer of a prophet named *Habakkuk*. He was concerned by what he saw in the national headlines; it seemed like his entire world was falling apart, and that everyone around him had lost their minds. Such violence! Such destruction! And where was God?

So Habakkuk talked with God, the Lord reassured him that everything was under control and had a purpose, and Habakkuk was left learning to trust in the goodness of God. Together we explored his prayer which moved him from sorrow to singing, from dread to praise. And we saw a pattern for our own prayers as we rely upon God's sovereignty and love, even if we can't see how he is at work in our circumstances.

This morning, we're going to look at the prayer of another Old Testament prophet — kind of an historical follow—up to the experience of Habakkuk. It's the prayer of a man named *Ezra*, and his prayer introduces us to the idea

of a much broader focus of our conversations with God. In this case, it shows us what *national* prayer looks like — the prayer for a nation. (Which seems especially appropriate on this holiday weekend. 😊)

## Background

But first a little lesson in history:

- **605 BC** — The monstrous nation of Babylon sweeps across the Fertile crescent, having wiped out Assyria, driven away Egypt, and now beginning to sweep away the Hebrews in a vicious, all-encompassing destruction of Judah beginning with the first wave of deportation of the Jews to Babylon.
- **597 BC** — A second wave of Jews are deported.
- **586 BC** — A third and final wave of Jews are deported, leaving nobody left in the Promised Land. Their cities are destroyed, including Jerusalem, and the Temple is completely dismantled until there isn't a stone upon stone.
- **539 BC** — Persia, along with the Medes (the former allies of Babylon) put an end to the Babylonian Empire.

- **538 BC** — One year later, the Persian king Cyrus II allows exiles to return to Jerusalem. Just as they were taken in three waves, they'll be returning in three waves.
- **536 BC** — Cyrus II decrees the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, marking an unexpected restoration of God's dwelling place among the remnant of his people.
- **520 BC** — Following a brief interruption for Samaritan opposition, the Persian king Darius I issues a decree which allows the rebuilding to continue.
- **515 BC** — The Temple in Jerusalem is complete and the 70-year exile is officially over.
- **458 BC** — The second wave of exiles return to Jerusalem, led by a priest and scribe named Ezra, who calls for national spiritual & ethical reform.
- **445 BC** — The third wave of exiles return, led by a Persian royal servant named Nehemiah. They focus on rebuilding the city walls and completing the reforms that had begun.

***Habakkuk***, which we looked at last week, prayed *before* the Babylonians dragged everyone off into captivity. ***Ezra***, who we'll look at today, prays *after* those captives have begun returning and rebuilding their lives in the Promised Land.

Think of it as a “national do-over.” God has wiped the land clean... literally. There’s nothing left, other than some worrisome tribes of nomadic barbarians stirring up trouble. Otherwise, the Promised Land is similar to when God’s people originally settled there under *Joshua*...

- before they became arrogant and self-reliant,
- before they ignored God,
- before they demanded a human king like the other nations,
- before they split into the two nations of Israel and Judah,
- before they embraced pagan worship and demonism,
- before God’s judgment was unleashed.

This was their opportunity to start over and do things right. The book of *Ezra* gives us an account of the return to the land, how that came about, lists of exiles who returned, descriptions of the rebuilding process, rededication of a new Temple and reintroduction of the Passover celebration, and more.

## **A Portrait of Holiness**

God was blessing a nation that had shaken their fist at him and chosen to worship demonic monsters instead of trusting in his goodness. A clean slate was an amazing gift.

So surely the people were grateful, right? Surely they learned their lesson and decided to do things differently, right? Surely they would be **“one nation under God”** (to coin a phrase 😊), right?

Nope. You see, with Ezra arriving in the land — this influential and respected scholar, this priest, this scribe — he was greeted with news about the sin of the postexilic people.



The Jewish leaders came to me and said, “Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land.” *(Ezra 9:1 NLT)*



“They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites.”  
*(Ezra 9:1 NLT)*



Right back to what got them into trouble in the first place. Seven decades of exile in Babylon taught them nothing. And the specific sin that was so alarming involved the way the people were binding themselves in relationships with the pagans of the region.

This is important for us to understand, or everything else that follows won't make sense. You see, when God led his people into the land he promised them, he insisted that they keep themselves pure from the surrounding nations. This was *not* some form of racism on God's part. God was trying to show the world what holiness looks like, using the Hebrews as a living portrait of a divine truth. Holiness means purity. Untainted. Unblemished. Uncompromising. It is God's holiness that allows him to be present among us — as the incarnate Jesus, to even literally walk through creation as one of us — and yet remain separate and pure. Holiness is the demonstration of righteousness without cutting corners.

And holiness is really significant for the world to understand, because it's the reason we so desperately need a Savior. As people who have sinned — who are *unholy* — we are unable to make ourselves pure. We are *outsiders* of God's holiness. We don't belong; we *can't* belong. God's holiness keeps him separate from us and cut off from him.

That's not what God desires; he is eager for all of us to be swept up in a loving, faithful, dependent intimacy with him. But we can't do it. We need *him* to do it for us. That's what Jesus is all about.

But if God's people began intermarrying with the pagans — if they *shared* the Promised Land — then the

portrait of holiness would be lost. It would be a portrait of compromise instead. And, within a generation, the bloodline of Abraham — the chosen nation of God — would be distorted and no longer separate. That's fine when it comes to the inclusiveness of others and the equality and value of all people. In God's kingdom, according to ***Galatians 3:28***, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female. God considers all of his people equal.

But historically? God wanted the Hebrews to teach the world a lesson about something bigger. When they didn't — when the Hebrews intermarried with the pagans — their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren increasingly ignored God's instructions and embraced horrific, barbaric customs. They blended in with the rest of the world... as if God wasn't real... as if God didn't matter.

## **A Dangerous Compromise**

And now that they were back in the Promised Land after their exile, well...



“The men of Israel have married women from these people and have taken them as wives for their sons. So the holy race has become polluted by these

mixed marriages. Worse yet, the leaders and officials have led the way in this outrage.” (Ezra 9:2 NLT)

Now this may not seem like a big deal to you. That’s because we’re living in a different era, and God is at a different point in telling the story of salvation through history. We’ve seen our own inadequacy and the need of a Savior, and we’ve discovered that Savior is named Jesus.



But in Ezra’s era, this news was devastating... in ways that go immeasurably further than *Tevye’s* fury at the idea of his Jewish daughter marrying a Russian soldier in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Though, interestingly, if you understand that show, you can glimpse what’s going on here. In *Fiddler*, Tevye feared that if his daughter married a Russian, she would be led away from her faith. What’s more, her children would be caught in a compromise instead of being raised with a sure and compelling presentation of their heritage.

It’s the very same reason **Paul** writes to the Christians in the city of **Corinth** 500 years after **Ezra**:



Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14 ESV)

What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? *(2 Corinthians 6:15 ESV)*

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” *(2 Corinthians 6:16 ESV)*

“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing...” *(2 Corinthians 6:17 ESV)*

Paul refers to ***Leviticus*** and ***Exodus, Isaiah*** and ***Ezekiel*** and ***Zephaniah***, to ***2 Samuel*** and ***Jeremiah*** and ***Hosea*** — showing that over and over God has made a similar point that still applies to us today. Just ask any faithful follower of Christ who has formed a business partnership with an unbeliever, or who has married someone who does not share their faith. Such relationships lead to either a whole lot of heartache because the people don't share the same priorities and perspectives and passions, or else they lead to a whole lot of compromise just to make things work. It's why I won't perform a wedding ceremony between a believer and an unbeliever — not because I'm rejecting anyone. Just the opposite, actually. My heart is eager for everyone to be

united and understand their incredible, infinite value as God's creation. But it's abundantly clear — both in God's instructions and in the examples of history — that bad things happen when God's people compromise their faith and try to “fit in” with the rest of the world.



Hey, look at our own nation as an example. I don't want to be political here, but I think there's enough documented evidence to say that there were solid Christian principles at the foundation of this American experiment of democracy and freedom. Even the atheists among our Founding Fathers agreed to embrace biblical principles for the establishment of our society. Thomas Jefferson himself — whose faith and understanding of truth is questionable — put it to paper that America should never *impose* the faith of a specific Christian sect upon its people, but that it should be governed as a nation of faith.

But have our increasing efforts to secularize our society led to greater stability and unity, or have they led to conflict and moral decay?

This is what concerned Ezra so greatly. The people were heading down the familiar road of sin and compromise, and they should have known better how that leads to disaster. So when Ezra was told about the sin of the nation — and

specifically about how national leaders were promoting interfaith relationships...



When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. *(Ezra 9:3 NLT)*

It was that big of a deal.



Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice. *(Ezra 9:4 NLT)*

## How Did It Happen?

A couple of things strike me as I read of the people returning to the very sin that brought such trouble upon them in the first place, and the emotional distress of Ezra upon hearing about it all.

First, I have to wonder how it happened. Were those ancient Hebrews unusually stupid or something? Were they especially sinful and hateful toward God? Not at all. The truth is that they struggled with the same things we do

today. Oh, the specifics may have changed with the times, but the issues are certainly familiar.



Think about it. The Jews were caught up in a desire to fit in with the nations around them. It's why they cried out for a king so long ago. It's why they didn't totally drive out the Canaanites during the time of the conquest. It's why some of them remained behind in Babylon and merged their lives with those of their captors. They wanted to be "God's Chosen People," but they didn't want their separatism to provoke rejected from the world around them.

It's very much the way some religious trends today — groups that would identify themselves as followers of Christ — will embrace political correctness so easily. They're almost embarrassed by things in the Bible... stuff like the reality of hell, the commands to share with everyone, instructions about loving an enemy, that whole stuff about sexual purity exclusively within the context of marriage between a man and woman... stuff like that.

Hey, I get it. I'm guilty of my own struggle with compromise, and God's Spirit has nudged me about it repeatedly but I'm a bit fearful of the implications. On the one hand, I want to stay engaged with our culture. I want to be relevant. I want to connect with the stuff that people connect with. On the other hand, I sometime use that as an

excuse for choosing entertainment that's neither healthy nor God-honoring. I'll find myself watching a movie — or even recommending a good movie to a friend — thinking that it's all good as long as I offer a disclaimer like, **“Well, it's a great movie... other than that one raunchy sex scene, but you can just fast-forward through it.”**

I don't want to become fearful or legalistic about my moral choices. And I certainly don't want the devil to shackle me with a false sense of guilt. I just want to reflect the heart of Christ and the freedom I have in him. (But the moment I say that I'm keenly aware that Jesus would probably never recommend a movie that required **“fast-forwarding through the raunchy part.”**)

So I stumble head-first into Paul's discussion in ***1 Corinthians 10:***



**“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful.**

**“All things are lawful,” but not all things build up.**

*(1 Corinthians 10:23 ESV)*

It's a common struggle for all of us who seek to live out the righteousness of Christ... all thanks to that foolish decision in the Garden of Eden to feast upon **“the knowledge of both good and evil”** — forcing us to struggle with ethics, and morality, and being invitational while also separate.



And trying to build up a moral code or religious system that will somehow preserve our righteous behavior just won't do it.

- Having the Law didn't keep the Hebrews pure.
- Having a Temple atop the mountain of Jerusalem, with the symbolic presence of God at the very heart of their society, didn't do it.
- Scratching God's name on our currency or carving the Ten Commandments on our courtroom walls won't do it.
- Pressuring an entire culture to go to church every Sunday, and imposing stronger content coding or censorship upon all the entertainment we consume won't do it.
- Neither will taking the opposite approach by celebrating the grace of God to the point of permissiveness. As soon as we ignore the instructions of God by cutting corners and rationalizing our compromise, we start experiencing the consequences of our own fallenness. **"It's a slippery slope, I tell ya...!"**

# Ezra's Prayer

So I'm struck by Ezra's passionate distress over the news of national compromise as well as spiritual and moral decline. This is a really big deal to him. Because when God's people stop representing God's holiness, we have a serious problem.

But I'm also struck by the passion of Ezra's response to the news as captured in his heart-to-heart conversation with God. After tearing his garments and plucking out his hair and beard in distress, after spending a day in utter silence pondering the implications of the sin of his people, Ezra falls upon his knees. He spreads out his arms, reaching to heaven, with tears streaming down his face. And he prays:



O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to you. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. *(Ezra 9:6 NLT)*



From the days of our ancestors until now, we have been steeped in sin. That is why we and our kings and our priests have been at the mercy of the pagan kings of the land. We have been killed, captured, robbed, and disgraced, just as we are today. *(Ezra 9:7 NLT)*



But now we have been given a brief moment of grace, for the LORD our God has allowed a few of us to survive as a remnant. He has given us security in this holy place. Our God has brightened our eyes and granted us some relief from our slavery. *(Ezra 9:8 NLT)*



For we were slaves, but in his unfailing love our God did not abandon us in our slavery. Instead, he caused the kings of Persia to treat us favorably. He revived us so we could rebuild the Temple of our God and repair its ruins. He has given us a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem. *(Ezra 9:9 NLT)*



And now, O our God, what can we say after all of this? For once again we have abandoned your commands! *(Ezra 9:10 NLT)*



Your servants the prophets warned us when they said, “The land you are entering to possess is totally defiled by the detestable practices of the people living there. From one end to the other, the land is filled with corruption.” *(Ezra 9:11 NLT)*



“Don’t let your daughters marry their sons! Don’t take their daughters as wives for your sons. Don’t ever promote the peace and prosperity of those

nations. If you follow these instructions, you will be strong and will enjoy the good things the land produces, and you will leave this prosperity to your children forever.” *(Ezra 9:12 NLT)*

Now we are being punished because of our wickedness and our great guilt. But we have actually been punished far less than we deserve, for you, our God, have allowed some of us to survive as a remnant. *(Ezra 9:13 NLT)*

But even so, we are again breaking your commands and intermarrying with people who do these detestable things. Won't your anger be enough to destroy us, so that even this little remnant no longer survives? *(Ezra 9:14 NLT)*

O LORD, God of Israel, you are just. We come before you in our guilt as nothing but an escaped remnant, though in such a condition none of us can stand in your presence. *(Ezra 9:15 NLT)*

And at the words of Ezra's prayer, the great crowd of men and women and children who had gathered together began to weep bitterly.



Ezra's prayer is different from all the other examples we've considered over the past two months. This an *intercessory* prayer. Ezra hasn't *personally* violated God's instructions here. He isn't steeped in sin. He hasn't forged a marriage bond with someone who doesn't believe in his God.

Yet he confesses on behalf of the nation. He intercedes for everyone in prayer. He speaks the words that all of the Hebrews should speak to God because of their sin — words that they *will* speak to God as a nation before the book of *Ezra* is complete.

- Ezra's prayer is a model of honest, transparent confession for us. No excuses or attempts to rationalize the rebellion.
- The nation embraces Ezra's model of prayer in their own confession, as seen in the next chapter.
- And we should follow that example as well as you and I pray for our own nation, our leaders, and our influence upon the world.

As Paul wrote to his apprentice, *Timothy*, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century:



I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. *(1 Timothy 2:1 NLT)*



Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. *(1 Timothy 2:2 NLT)*



This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. *(1 Timothy 2:3–4 NLT)*

## The Purpose of National Prayer

So God tells you and me to honor the leaders he has placed in our lives (and I believe the principle here extends to parents, to teachers, to employers, to law enforcement, to elected officials, to ministry team leaders, and to everyone to whom God has given a mantle of authority for their context). Honor our leaders and pray for them. Be thankful for them. Intercede for them. Speak the words on their behalf. Pray what they should pray. Stand in the gap the way Ezra did.



Why? Well, as we've seen in our study of prayer these past couple of months, the goal is *not* to badger the Lord enough until he finally caves in to our demands. Prayer isn't

so much a method for motivating God to action as it is a conversation with the Lord that transforms *us*.

When I ask God to bless the authority in my life, I end up having to trust God.

When the authority in my life becomes aware of my prayers on his behalf, he may sense the honor and submission I am offering him, which in turn may lead to a more peaceful and quiet existence under his authority.

But even if that authority is oblivious to the prayers offered on his behalf, *I* experience the effects of my prayer for him. I'm drawn to honoring him, to trusting God, and to seeking peace.

Last week we talked about that feeling that the world is falling apart, that whole societies and nations are making crazy choices, that we're so small and powerless amidst all the chaos. Folks, for me the solution is following Ezra's example. I may only have one vote in the upcoming election (which I intend to cast with great doubt and dread, I'm afraid). But God remains sovereign no matter what the voters decide. The elections of a nation cannot thwart the plans of the Lord and the story he is telling throughout history.

And that sovereign, wise, involved, righteous, and merciful God says it pleases him when we pray and intercede on behalf of our nation and especially our leaders.

Perhaps by using Ezra's prayer as a template for our own, by praying for our nation, for our leaders, for our neighbors and community, perhaps by confessing our collective sins and placing ourselves in God's hands, we just might provoke a similar response from the world around us, just as God said.

And whether or not our culture drops to their knees at our side and seeks the Lord, or whether we stand alone on behalf of the people around us, we pray in the midst of God's magnificent, almighty presence and power... knowing that, one day,



...At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. *(Philippians 2:10–11 NLT)*



**PRAYER • SONG:** *How Great Is Our God*