

## Confession: Awakening Hearts Numb to Sin

*Ezra 9*

*"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."*

**Introduction:** A numbing effect can be beneficial. Five months ago when I sauntered into Dr. Kosta's office after 8 (ish) years of being to a dentist, he skillfully filled my gums with Novocain to numb as he drilled cavities. A few weeks ago I picked up the guitar for the first time in too long and wished I still had calluses on the tips of my fingers to deaden the pain from pressing on steel strings. Without this kind of numbing effect these activities would cause debilitating pain.

However, there are negative sides to numbing effects. There is a type of desensitizing that happens when something becomes so familiar that it no longer causes a response. This can happen in **marriages** as we stop pursuing a spouse and simply see our beloved as ordinary or take them for granted since we no longer have that nervous, sweaty palmed reaction when we are around them. It happens in the **culture around us** as people are exposed to sex and violence on such a continual scale that young men are convinced that women are there to serve them and violence and death no longer bring abhorrence and fear but enjoyment and pleasure. We have seen this continual creep of moral relativism (where anything goes, nothing is sacred, unless you violate what someone else holds sacred) in the rash of Hollywood "scandals" as people are finally up in arms about abuse but not ready to call out all sin, only those that are not socially accepted right now. And finally, numbness toward sin can creep into the **church**, into our **families** and into the **individual lives** of those who seek to follow and glorify God in Christ. We get comfortable with sin, allowing what was once unacceptable and unthinkable to become normalized, practiced, and eventually enjoyed, all the while **dulling our hearts toward God and the holiness He calls us to.**

We find Ezra coming back to a situation of people who were once vibrant in worship, "*celebrating the dedication of the house of God with great joy*" (Ezra 6:16), keeping the Passover, and observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread for "*seven days with joy for the LORD had made them joyful*". (6:22). What happened over the years? What caused vibrant, effective group that had the people of the land come and **join them in worship** (6:21), to give up all ground and instead join worship of the nations around? Today we explore not only the answer to **how this happened**, but also **what the solution is.**

Have you felt your heart numbed toward God and worship? Have you been desensitized to your sin so that you would claim not even to notice any in your life? Have you become callus to the leading of the Spirit, and has your joy been minimal? Ezra helps walk us through that kind of situation, helping us deal with our hearts and inconsistencies.

The Reformers had a phrase "*Simul Justus et Peccator*", which simply means "Simultaneously justified and sinner". This sums up to us why we struggle with the numbing effects of sin. We are from one perspective declared righteous by the work of Jesus on the cross, satisfying the wrath of God so that He could impute Christ's righteousness to us, and at the same time under God's analysis, we are sinful. Our life in Christ is this struggle to live out the realities of a **new life in Christ**, where the **power** of sin has been broken, but the realities of our flesh still wage war. So we are given this gift, the gift of **confession of sin**. It guarantees that we can actively deal with and find forgiveness for our sin, even if we have struggled over and over again. John said it this way in **1 John 2:1-2:**

*"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an **advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous**. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."*

This not only encapsulates God's desire for us but also His work on our behalf. This is a practical summary of Ezra 9 as a nation confesses their sin to restore true worship and effectiveness. This is the **hope we have this morning**: as we freely confess our sin against a holy God, He forgives it through the atoning work of Jesus, and gives us new motivation and ability to pursue Him in holiness.

### High Reaching Call of Holiness (1)

*"After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have **not separated themselves from the peoples** of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites."*

#### Definition and Expectation

God had been abundantly clear with Israel as to His expectations. He did not give progressive revelation or nebulous commands, but laid it out clear and thick. In **Exodus 34:11-16** He gave Moses a similar list of nations to avoid so that they would not become a **snare to them** (12). The nation of Israel was to go into a foreign land, break down the false systems of worship, and establish something new, pure, and separate. God gave the reason: **"for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God"** (34:14). God never was going to compete for the affections of His people, but simply called them to wholehearted devotion to Him and the avoidance of combining worship with any other god, deity, or system.

In **Deuteronomy 7:1-4** He told the people entering into the Promised land to **make no covenant** with the same list we find here in Ezra, and specifically not to **intermarry with the nations**, since they would lead the hearts of their sons and daughters away to other gods, incurring the anger of the Lord against them.

So when Ezra returned, he found the people of Israel had violated, AGAIN, the clear command of God. They had done exactly what God had told them not to do, and had experienced the judgment in the exact way that He had promised. Does that not sum us up when we sin? As born again believers, the shackles of sin are gone, but the allure of sin is still there. We sin now not because we *have to*, but unfortunately, because we still *want to*. Before we criticize Israel, we must remember that we mimic them far too often.

#### Effectiveness Promised

Was God just a curmudgeon? Is He simply trying to *keep* us away from culture and fun, making us seem weird to the culture around for no good reason? The answer to **why** He calls us to be holy, separate, and distinct from the culture around is the same as Israel, and is two-fold:

1) **He is Holy, and can only deal with sinful people if there is satisfaction for that sin** - This is why Peter reminded us that "we are to be holy, for He is holy", but since that is impossible in ourselves, we had to be ransomed by the "precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:16-19). God offers Himself as something completely different than what any culture or religion can. God does not offer satisfaction of our felt needs but of our deepest needs. He does not require us to work to get to Him, or to become holy somehow by working out morality, but He satisfied His own requirement of holiness so that we could find the joy and relationship that had eluded us so successfully our entire life.

2) **He promises effectiveness to His holy people** - (2 Tim. 2:20-21) - "Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work". God uses a holy vessels. He does the work and

desires that we would "shine like lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." (Phil. 2:15-16). He calls us to be faithful and trust Him to be holy, and through us, will reach through the darkness of the world.

What does that mean for us? Our holiness is more important than what we accomplish. God will always accomplish His will, and has chosen to use us to that end. However, He does not need us, but chooses to use us. Remember Daniel chose faithfulness over greatness by not compromising in the Babylonian kings court, but resolved that he would not defile himself (Dan 1:8). God took that faithfulness and "gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs" (Dan. 1:9). When we accomplish anything in our own strength and even sin, the glory is directed toward us, and God will never share His glory with another. Holiness is more important than what we accomplish.

### **Subtle Numbing of Sin** (9:2)

*"For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the **holy race** has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this **faithlessness** the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.*

So what did Ezra find, and how did it come to the surface? **First**, he found that there was rampant intermarriage in the land. To be clear, God called Israel to be pure as a people, but intermarriage was NOT primarily an issue of RACE, but of WORSHIP. Two examples that show this are the lives of Ruth and Rahab, as well as King Solomon. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who was saved by her faith God, escaping the destruction of her land and joining Israel. Ruth was a Moabite (one on the list), and she ended up marrying an Israelite named Boaz. Both these foreign women not only became members of Israel, they are both included in the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:5)! So God, in His grace, ushered in foreign women into the line of the KING.

King Solomon, on the other hand, loved women (like his father David before him) and they became his stumbling block. **1 Kings 11:1-9** tells us that he "loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women". Do you see similar names here? He had many wives, 700 to be exact, along with 300 concubines (yikes), and they "*turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God.*" (11:3-4). This was the real issue with "foreign" women. It was an issue of worship, not race. God is FOR the nations coming together in Christ, and interracial marriages are to be celebrated as a display of God's grace, rather than something God is against. God is clear about being yoked unequally with unbelievers, however, and makes the point in **2 Cor. 6:14**, that believers should not be joined together with those who do not. This is a consistent principle throughout Scripture.

**Second**, Ezra had been in Jerusalem just over **4 months** when this fact of intermarriage was discovered. It took him some time to get acquainted with the land and people and get a pulse on everything. But it also meant that as he began to teach God's Word that he had prepared himself with all those years (Ezra 7:10) began to expose the sin that was going on. The people began to be convicted (9:4) by the Word, and even the leaders lives were exposed. This is why the Word of God in preaching, teaching, devotions, and worship is so vital. **God's Word exposes the darkness in our lives and hearts** and shines a light on any drift that has taken place in either.

**How did this happen?** Ezra 9 shines a light on this:

### **Absorbing of Cultural Norms**

Being set apart from a culture is difficult, is it not? We work jobs, play sports, enjoy entertainment, shop at stores, and hang out at the same beaches as those who are not born again. And WE ARE SUPPOSED TO. God has not taken us out of the world, but called us to be a light WITHIN whatever context He has placed us. That means we are living in the same neighborhoods and working in the same places as the people that God has called us to reach with the gospel. This is why we believe that we need people to move to Rancho Cucamonga, to live in the community we are trying to reach through the church, to put their kids in sports, schools, and shop in the same stores as those in the city. This allows disciples to be made and then connected immediately to the church to learn all that Jesus commanded.

The downside of living in the culture we are trying to reach, however, is that we can easily be influenced by it rather than the other way around. That is what happened to the returned exiles in Jerusalem. They started separate, but then they began to see the "*peace and prosperity*" (9:12) around them, and they both sought and desired it. So it became easier and easier to join up with neighbors, to begin to think like them, enjoying what they enjoyed, laughing at what they laughed at, and begin to have sons marry their daughters and daughters marry their sons. Do you see how slowly, subtly, but continually this happens. Within a few decades there was not distinction of worship since marriage is always a blending of two people into one (like the way we celebrate holidays or birthdays).

This is still an issue and tension that we face today. Our issue is not about intermingling of race, but has everything to do with intermingling with belief, given time that leads to numbness. This is particularly seen in sex and marriage. Let me give just two examples:

**1) The adoption of pre-marital sex as normative** - Sex outside of marriage is nothing new. This is a plight of humanity back to the days before the flood as everyone did what was right in their own eyes. However, the change in our Christian culture has become eerily similar to that of the culture around. **1 Thessalonians 4:38** is abundantly clear that God's will is that we *abstain* (run far away from) sexual immorality, and exercise control of our body in holiness and honor! This is not easy, but it is clear. Now there is ALWAYS forgiveness for any sin, especially any sexual sin, but that does not give us any kind of license. My observation of doing counseling and weddings for those in this church and without is that professing believers often value **financial wellbeing over sexual purity**, and demonstrate this by dating for LONG periods of time, tempting and engaging in sexual sin, waiting to be financially secure. This is EXACTLY opposite of what God says. He says we are to work hard, but that He provides for us like the birds of the air (Matt. 6:25-33), while telling us to abstain from sex outside of marriage. Sex is glorious in marriage, a gift of grace to provide intimacy and worship for those who willingly enter into the covenant that is marriage. When this is violated *before* and is not reconciled and restored, we wonder why there is infidelity IN marriage. I have yet to meet with a person who says "I think I want to have an affair in year \_\_\_\_\_ of my marriage". We do not plan things this way. But we make these possible when we adopt worldly standards and conduct ourselves outside of God's clear commands.

**2) The adoption of worldly standards for marriage** - Marriage is a covenant relationship, a picture of Christ and His church, and is one built for intimacy. Children are a product of this union, and raising them in the fear of the Lord is difficult but possible. Marriage gives a beautiful picture to the world of the gospel, uniting two sinners who live by grace, forgiving each other and choosing to love each other. This is exactly why God calls a believer to be yoked together with another believer, since trying to mix it any other way is like trying to mix light and darkness. Now, God is always gracious to be compassionate to those in an unequally yoked marriage, and some of you experience the joy of that grace. But speaking to those who are NOT married but would like to be so, we MUST take it seriously and never compromise the standards God has set, not only for purity but for maturity.

### Lagging Leadership

Note that the one group that Ezra called out specifically was the officials and chief men. These were the leaders, those who were to lead by word and deed, by action and example. Where leaders go, so goes the home. Where leaders go, so goes the church. The writer of Hebrews said "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*" (Heb. 13:7). Paul said of his leadership "*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*" (Philippians 3:17), and could simply say "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Leaders are to be followed, since a leader with no followers is just a guy taking a walk. So this was the BIG problem in Jerusalem: the leaders were the biggest violators of God's commands. Once they capitulated, it was inevitable the rest would follow. This is why Paul told Timothy to discipline himself in life and doctrine: "*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourselves and your hearers.*" (1 Tim. 4:16). The leaders of Israel had become pragmatists, since they were like the culture around them and had given up any distinctiveness of one who was a worshipper of the Lord.

So to all the leaders in this room: pastors, elders, youth staff, teachers, parents, disciplers, and bosses, are you modeling a life that if followed would help others understand what it means to love Christ, to walk by faith, and find joy from abiding in Christ? In other words, are we living distinctly from those who don't know Christ? Has there been a radical shift of our values AWAY from what the world values or what we did before Christ? Are we doing things like everyone else, or is there a distinction of our goals and pattern of life? Where leadership goes, so goes the home and church. If we want both these institutions to be healthy, their leaders must be.

### Failing to Blush

We'll look next week at Ezra's response to this sin that was exposed, but we get a glimpse of his response now. He was appalled. He sat and fasted upon hearing all of this, and spread himself on the dirt and cried out to the Lord. The first thing he identified: "I am **ashamed** and **blush** to lift my face to you, my God." (9:6) This is very telling as to what was NOT happening in the land. An earlier generation was called out by the prophet Jeremiah for something similar:

*"Were they ashamed when they committed abominations? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown," says the Lord.*"

Jeremiah 6:15

There was no shame and blushing over sin. But I thought we are not supposed to walk in guilt and shame of our sin and past? The difference is this: sin brings guilt and shame, the gospel brings forgiveness and cleansing. But sin SHOULD bring grief. We should be embarrassed and guilt laden because we have sinned against our God, the one who loved, saved, and sustains us. The gospel means that we do not have to STAY in our guilt and shame because our sin has been fully paid for. But God uses our shame and blushing to drive us to repentance:

*"For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret, where as worldly grief produces death." 2 Corinthians 7:10*

When we fail to blush, it means that we have become numb to sin, especially numb to subtle sins of omission. This happens when we begin to watch and delight in the same things as the world, hoping that the couple in the movie gets together and find delight even when they live in sexual sin. Its laughing at crude and impure jokes or situations. It is when we find time to watch our favorite team or something else to the neglect of time with the Lord or family. And if these things are pointed out and there is an immediate defensiveness and self-justification, it means we have failed to blush over sin.

Are there sins you have simply **tolerated**? When was the last time you have wept over your sin? When was the last time that you confessed your sin to the Lord?

This is a weighty and kind of a downer of a message, but there is infinite good news on the back end of this message. The fact is, we can confess our sin and God is faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When we confess and repent, God restores our joy, our relationship with Him, with others, and fills our mouth with praise to Him and the message of hope to others. When we taste of this, we cannot help tell others and lift up God's name. Have you tasted it? Have you experienced the release of your guilt, shame, anger, resentment, hatred, pride, and selfishness through trusting in the work of Jesus and faith in Him? We are coming into the Christmas season, and it is a season of good news, great joy, and warm feelings, but it is first and foremost a reminder that we are a people who walked in darkness and saw a great light Jesus' work was so great because our sin had so much weight.

Next week we will look at what confession of sin looks like, and how leaders can walk people through this process. What a great preparation for Christmas and the rest of our lives!

### **Bold Response of Leadership**

**Prayer of Penitence**

**Appeal to God's Character**

**Acknowledgement of Personal sin**

**Acknowledgment of Personal need**