

Life Group Questions w/b Sunday 14 February 2021

Ezra – a Story of Rebuilding Week 7

Chapters 9-10

Historical Background

After such a promising story in Ezra 1-8, the final two chapters of the book feel like a bit of a disappointment. Many of the male Jewish settlers have married foreign wives, thus reneging on their covenant commitment to God. Ezra decides this needs to be dealt with, and by the end of chapter 10, the foreign wives who worship other gods have been sent away. It sounds as if they tried to do this on a case by case basis, and be as humane as possible. (Ezra 10:14-17)

We need to be very careful about reading these two chapters through our own cultural spectacles. This is basically a holiness issue – were those who had returned from Exile prepared to follow God wholeheartedly, or to make the same mistakes as their ancestors?

If time, read Deuteronomy 7:1-11 as this gives some background to Ezra 9-10.

It is part of the covenant that God made with his people so that they would flourish in the Promised Land. Those who were not Hebrews, but who chose to follow Yahweh were welcomed in. e.g. Rahab and Ruth. But on the whole, inter-marriage was a snare that would take God's people away from Him. (See King Solomon's behaviour in 1 Kings 11:1-4. After this point, the rot had really set in.) Inter-marriage was one of the main causes of the people failing to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and this desertion of God led to the Exile.

To avoid a repetition of this, it was essential that the Jewish line was kept pure as a people who worshipped the one true God alone. It was a recurring problem. In the last chapter of the book of Nehemiah we find that Nehemiah also had to deal with this issue. (See Nehemiah 13:23-27)

Read Ezra 9:1-5

Here, the list of people groups living in the land is very similar to the original list when the people of God first settled in the area. It is given as a reminder to the reader of the original covenant.

- How easy do you find it to understand Ezra's distress? Or does it feel like light years away?

- Does it matter to us if we feel that others we know are not following God? How do we deal with this?
- Ezra is concerned for the spiritual health of the people – whether they were walking with God or not. What issues might hinder our Christian discipleship today?

Read Ezra 9:6-15

- Why do you think that, before doing anything else, Ezra prays?
- How do we respond to challenging crises? Does prayer help?
- Why is so much of Ezra's prayer taken up with confession? Do you think confession is neglected in the Church today? If so, why?
- Why does Ezra identify with the sin of the nation (9:6-7)?
- What does he focus on in (9:8-9)?
- Why is his prayer so detailed in (9:10-12)? Doesn't God know all about this already?
- How does Ezra engage with God in (9:13-15)?
- Ezra prays on his own, but he also prays in the company of others (Ezra 10:1). Why is corporate prayer, as well as individual prayer, important to the spiritual health of God's people?
- In your experience, how is prayer related to action? (10:2-3)
- Are there any sins in our nation or culture that you specifically feel called to pray about?

Prayer Focus Suggestion

Take time to listen to God for the issues in our own culture that He would like you to focus on, and pray about these things.

Further Material – only if time!

Read Daniel 9:1-19

This is another great Old Testament prayer of confession – from a similar time, but in a different location – which Daniel prays when he is in exile in Babylon.

Compare his prayer with Ezra's. What are the similarities and the differences?

What can we learn here that will make a difference in our own prayer lives this week?