

**Ash Wednesday**  
**Lenten Theme: “Fall on Your Knees”**

**Text: Ezra 9:5,6,13**

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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 <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>“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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>“But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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 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.’ <sup>13</sup>“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. <sup>14</sup>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? <sup>15</sup>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.” (NIV)

***The Repentant Kneel***

“He got what he deserved.” We might say that about somehow who did something wrong who had something terrible happen to them. A number of years ago that was probably what many people thought about Jeffrey Dalmer when he was killed in prison.

When we do something bad and almost get caught, we might feel that we were lucky, but we might not feel a great sense of remorse.

When people are convicted of crimes, they will sometimes say that the punishment is fair. Other times they say that it was too harsh, but I have never heard someone say that they were punished less than they deserved. But that is exactly what Ezra confessed in our text. He knelt down in shame and confessed to God that He had punished His people far less than they deserved. It is that repentant humility before God that I would like to look at this evening as we look at how the repentant kneel.

I. Israel had been unfaithful to God from the beginning.

God made his covenant with Israel about 1,000 years earlier at Mount Sinai. They promised that they would do everything that God had commanded. Part of His command was to keep themselves separated from the nations around them, so that they would not fall into the sins of those nations. But the people didn't obey. They made the golden calf while Moses was still on Mount Sinai. Later they fell into Baal worship. They even began to sacrifice their children to the Baals, just like the Canaanites. Because of their unfaithfulness, God sent the Assyrians to completely destroy the 10 northern tribes in the year 722 BC. In 586 He sent the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem and carried the survivors into exile in Babylon. 70 years later the exiles were allowed to return just as the prophet Jeremiah said. The Persians conquered the Babylonians, and King Cyrus order the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. Those who returned are called "the remnant." They were far fewer people than had lived in the land previously. They were all that were left of the children of Israel.

A few years later a priest named Ezra returned with another group of exiles. He couldn't believe what the first group of exiles had done after they returned to the promised land. The men had taken foreign wives. It wasn't just the common men who did this. The priests and levites led the way by taking foreign wives. Ezra wasn't the only one who was upset by this. We also read that both Nehemia (13:25) and Malachi (2:10-16) condemned the people for this.

The remnant was beginning to fall into the same sin that their fathers did. The problem with this sin was not ethnic or racial. It was religious. The men would often adopt the religious practices of their wives, just as King Solomon did. At the same time that Ezra lived, there was a Jewish settlement in Egypt called the Elephantine community. Those Jews married pagan spouses and worshiped the gods of their spouses in addition to the Lord. Gradually that community assimilated and disappeared.

God had been so good to His people. He delivered them from their bondage in Egypt. He brought them to the promised land. He saved them from many enemies. Even after they followed other gods, He brought back a remnant. God did rebuke them and punish them many times. The book of judges shows how He often brought trouble to get the people to turn from their sins. The prophets warned the people. God severely punished them with the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile.

Haven't we often run the same course as Israel? God has blessed us in to many ways. We look at our earthly blessings. We have had a lot of snow this year. Yet, our homes are warm, and our streets are passable. In the past few weeks, I have visited several members of our congregation in the hospital. While we often complain about our health care today, has anyone in the history of the world ever had such good health care as we have in our nation? We have so much in our country. Yet, one of our biggest problems is that we still find a way to spend more than we can afford. We find ourselves

complaining because we haven't been blessed as much as someone else. In order to get what we want, so often we find ourselves engaging in practices which we know are not right. We will lie, cheat, steal, and take advantage of one another just to get what we want.

God has especially blessed us with an abundance of spiritual blessings. We are free to worship God in our country. Yet, so often we choose not to worship Him. There seem to be so many other things that are higher on our list of priorities today than worshipping God. There might even be a correlation to Ezra today. I wonder how many young people actually look for a Christian spouse. Is that high on the list of priorities? How many people have been swayed from their faith in Christ because they might have been looking for love in all the wrong places?

We look at how good God has been to us, and then we look at how we have forsaken Him and His ways. We can look at every one of the 10 Commandments and see how we have broken them all.

## II. The repentant kneel in confession of those sins.

Ezra tore his tunic and cloak. He pulled hair from his head and his beard, and he sat until the evening. Then he fell to His knees 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."* Ezra recounted how the people had been subject to the sword and captivity to pillage and humiliation because of their sins. Then he confesses, *"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."* After all that Israel had been through, Ezra confessed that they deserved more. He bowed in humble confession and pleaded for grace and mercy.

God has His ways of chastising us. There are ways that God has shown each one of us clearly that we were going the wrong way. We were taking His blessings and running. We were freely breaking His commandments. We were going to do what we felt like doing. In His mercy, God chastised us. He called us to turn back to Him. When we consider our disobedience, we fall on our knees and say, "Lord, I have been punished less than I deserved. I don't deserve to stand in your presence." (Vs 15)

## III. God has an answer to that repentant confession.

He forgives our sins. Ezra told the people that there was still hope. He told them to make a covenant with God. (10:2,3) We know that there is hope for sinners like us. God has made a new covenant with us, which is based on the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. We come before God in humble confession, and He lifts us up with the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. This lenten season we reflect on our sins, but we especially journey to Calvary's cross where we see that Jesus Christ has paid for every one of our sins. We confess that we deserve death and hell because of our sins, but we look to Christ in hope, knowing that He has paid for all of our sins in full. You might say that yesterday was a good picture of what Lent is all about, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

I can't image that I would have ever said to my parents after they had punished me, that I deserved a lot more, but that it exactly what we as Christians confess to God. We look at our sins, selfishness

and disobedience. Then we consider how God has chastised us, and we must confess. I deserved more. We thank God for His mercy, His patience, and His forgiveness for us, that He hears our confession and forgives our sins in full for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.

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