

SM 041920

A Space of Grace

Sunday Morning Message

Text – Ezra 9

Congregational Reading – Ezra 9:6 - 9

Introduction

The historical context of the Book of Ezra is the return of a remnant of the people of God into the city of Jerusalem in the land of Israel, after they had spent seventy years in captivity, first in Babylon and then in Persia.

The people of God had been conquered and taken captive first by the Assyrians and finally by the Babylonians. This was a judgment of God because they had forsaken His Law by worshipping and serving the gods of the heathen nations that surrounded them. Among the crimes committed by Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were that all forms of immorality were tolerated; the poor were exploited, and innocent blood was shed. The nation had become consumed with seeking pleasure, and had completely turned her back on God.

Judgment came, first to the northern kingdom of Israel, and finally to the southern kingdom of Judah including the capital of Jerusalem. The Babylonians invaded the city, slaughtered many of the people, and completely destroyed the Temple of God. It was a humiliating defeat to a nation who was once the greatest power on the earth. All of this because they had turned their back on the Lord. This horrible judgment took place in 586 BC. God had warned them that this would happen, and had even told them that their captivity would last for at least 70 years.

Fast forward now to the time of Ezra the priest, who was among the people who returned to Jerusalem and was part of the rebuilding and revival that was taking place there. God had given Israel another chance. A remnant of 50,000 first returned to the land of Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel who rebuilt the Temple around 515 BC. Ezra came to Jerusalem around 450 BC, sixty-five years after the completion of the Temple, but before the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, which would take place a little later under the leadership of Nehemiah.

God had given Israel another chance. He had allowed them to come back to their beloved city, rebuild their Temple, and their lives. They could worship and serve their God as God had commanded them. They could get things right again, and then enjoy the blessings of

God: including safety and security from enemies; protection from natural disasters and disease; and abundant provision and prosperity. When Ezra arrived on the scene they were doing well, but already there were signs that Israel was beginning to backslide. According to chapter nine, they were guilty of intermarrying, outside of their faith. Men of Israel were marrying women who were from the heathen people surrounding them. The nation of Israel was now a hodgepodge of different people groups and various heathen faiths, and these false idols were beginning to creep back into the homes of the people of God in Jerusalem. God had explicitly commanded them not to marry outside of their faith. Why? Because that is how false worship would work its way back into Israel, and the people of God would begin to worship other gods.

"And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly. But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth."

(Deuteronomy 7:2-6)

One of their many problems before the captivity was the worship of idols, or false gods, and it all started when Israelites married outside of their faith. It was now happening again.

Read Ezra 9

Notice again vs. 8 – 9:

"And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem." (Ezra 9:8-9)

God had given a remnant of Israel a space of grace, a period of reviving, and Ezra was preaching to the people so that they would stop doing the things that displeased the Lord,

including in this particular example, marrying outside of the faith and allowing the worship of other gods to creep back into Israel.

God gave Israel a space of grace back in the days of Josiah as well.

Turn to 2 Kings 22.

This was before the captivity. Israel went through a period of several bad leaders. The nation had fallen away had become very wicked. Along comes Josiah who became the king of Judah when he was only eight. Josiah was a great king and want to do right. He wanted Israel to turn back to God. One of the things that he did was repair the Temple. It had been neglected for years, and it needed a lot of work, so Josiah ordered the renovation of the House of God. While the workers were doing their work, they came across a copy of the Word of God, which had apparently not been available or even seen for many years. The Book is delivered to Josiah who reads it, and discovers all of the things that the nation should have been doing, or not doing. He realized that God's people were guilty of and tolerated many things that displeased God. He goes to a prophetess, named Huldah, and asks her to inquire of God.

Read 2 Kings 22:16 – 22.

God gave Josiah a space of grace, and the people of God enjoyed the blessings of God for a few more years.

Transition

For many years, here in America, we have been enjoying a space of grace, We can still worship God freely, but we are beginning to see an erosion of our religious liberties. We are in a period right now where some of our local authorities are forbidding us to gather for worship, a right that has been guaranteed to us by our Constitution. Our nation and much of the world are in the midst of a judgment allowed by God, perhaps so that we will turn our eyes back on Him. Perhaps so that we will stop all of the things that we have been guilty of, as a nation, that displease Him:

We have practically thrown Him out of our government and our schools.

Our universities are filled with professors who deny Him and teach that we are nothing but evolved beings who came from sequence of events that had nothing to do with God.

We are consumed with pleasures: truly we are as Paul stated: "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). Our pursuit of pleasure has made us a nation full of covetous gluttons, and drunkards.

Our pursuit of pleasure has caused us to pervert God's plan for sexual intimacy. We have long ago abandoned concept of holy matrimony, and now promote all kinds of promiscuity outside of marriage, and even marriages of the same sex.

"For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;" (Romans 1:26-28)

The pursuit of sexual pleasure has caused millions of unwanted pregnancies, and instead of giving these precious children to married couples who would readily adopt them, we have chosen as a nation to murder our unborn babies.

America is guilty and judgment is certainly coming eventually. This nation which claims to be "one nation under God" is very close to going completely under, if she doesn't turn back to the Lord. There is still hope. We can still enjoy a little space of grace, if we will simply turn back to the Lord.

Conclusion - What can you and I do as God's people?

"If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:13-14)

1. You can pray – pray for our nation; pray for lost souls; pray for your family
2. You can live for God – don't you be guilty of doing any of these things that got us in trouble.
3. You can go to the Word of God for answers and encouragement.
4. You can win souls – The lost world out there is scared. They need Christ, and you can help them.
5. You can stay positive – you have hope. You have a God who promised that He will never leave you or forsake you, and also promises to take care of whatever you need.

We know from the Bible that judgment is coming to this world, but it could be that if God's people, the remnant, got revived, that we could postpone that judgment a few more years. Maybe God will extend our space of grace.