

# Ezra 9-10

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## *Lesson 3 Fall 2013 Series 5*

These last two chapters of Ezra are dominated by the theme of exogamy<sup>1</sup>, but this is in reality not the major theme, despite being the foremost concern. It is instead the issue through which Ezra conveys several vital themes to the reader. The marriages that concern Ezra are those that involve theological compromise where unions have been undertaken with women from groups of people involved in polytheistic religions. The primary theme conveyed by exposing the problem is that there is a need for the people of God to reject idolatry and pagan practices. The prohibition to intermarry was always because of the danger of the practices of those with whom they intermarried: they would bring with them the temptation to worship other gods.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is marriage outside of a specific group especially as required by custom or law.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 261. Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 319.

It was the combination of the pagan influences and the close proximity of idolaters to the people of Israel that led to the ancestors of the Judeans falling into idolatry and being expelled from the land. In 723 BC the Northern tribes were dispersed in exile and then in 587 BC the Southern tribes went into Babylonian captivity. This last expulsion was some 150 years before the time of Ezra. Moses (Deuteronomy 7:3-6) had given warnings regarding intermarrying with the people of the land. The mixing of the holy seed with pagan elements was a threat to Israel because it put them in a position of breaking the first commandment, but also threatened the gospel hope that the promise of the holy seed would be fulfilled in the incarnation of the Messiah. The Messiah was to come through the lineage of Israel, the line of David.<sup>3</sup>

Intermarriage was no doubt attractive to a people who had been defeated and felt the need to make earthly alliances, especially for those that were wealthy. Marriages were often used to advance political and financial

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 319-320.

aspirations. Temporal well-being has often been the motivation for failing to follow the path of God. The focus can often shift away from the eternal benefits and the gracious and merciful God to that which brings sensual and earthly gratification. It should be noted that a second prominent theme in Ezra 9-10 is repentance. This is especially embodied in Ezra's prayer (9:6-15). There is an alternation in this prayer between the theme of confession of sin and the acknowledgement of God's grace. Both of these elements are part of a truly penitent attitude. Ezra clearly indicates that Israel has been treated far better than they deserve by God.<sup>4</sup> Surely this is something that all of us could acknowledge when we are not wallowing in selfishness.

Finally, Ezra is shown to be a wise spiritual leader and therefore as an example of what a spiritual leader should embody. He exemplifies the type of leader that the priests of the Old Testament should have been (Ezra 10:10-11). The people gathered around Ezra because he taught them

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 320.

the word of God, this was the central focus for him. Ezra used all the gifts that God gave to him to lead the people of God in an upright and Godly direction.<sup>5</sup>

9:1-4 – This chapter begins with a report being made to Ezra regarding the fact that the people had not separated themselves from the people of the lands that were noted for their idolatry. This meant that the holy seed of the people of God was mixed with that of the idolatrous people that would very likely lead them away from devotion to God. The response of Ezra was both immediate and dramatic. He demonstrates his horror at this news with physical actions that will have indicated his inner turmoil and great distress. Verse 4 is particularly telling as it indicates that all who “trembled” (תָּרַדוּ) at the words of the God of Israel “sat appalled” (יָשָׁבוּ מְשׁוּמִים). Ezra’s reaction drew out of others the very best.<sup>6</sup> He does not enforce rules as a dictator, but shows the people his heart. This challenges the people to examine their hearts and this examination leads them to a

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 320.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series, vol. 12 (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 77.

reaction like that of Ezra. The idea behind this word is that they were desolate, destitute or laid waste. They felt that they were in a state of ruin because of failing to be obedient to the command of God. If this were the end of the story this would truly be a sad and devastating moment, but in this moment of defeat they are driven to reach out to God and truly become a heroic example for generations that would follow.

9:5-15 – We are told that Ezra gets up from fasting, with his garments still torn and he does something unusual to demonstrate his contrition and humility before God. Today, we as Christians do not feel the full impact of this act, but this is a departure from what is expected as Ezra falls to his knees. This man, who had come to represent for the people of Israel God's word, now begins this act of contrition on his knees.<sup>7</sup> He expresses his shame, and even indicates that his shame is so great that he feels embarrassed to lift his face up to God. Notice how he includes himself corporately in the sins of the people even

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<sup>7</sup> Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra • Nehemiah*, in the Anchor Bible series, vol. 14 (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 78.

though individually he is not responsible. This sin has only just now come to his attention.

It is important to notice how Ezra's prayer alternates between a confession of sin and an acknowledgement of the grace of God. It is also noteworthy that even though Ezra had not personally committed these sins he confesses them. Some might say this does not apply to us today as we do not have priests and we do not have those that stand in this position. It is interesting how Peter uses this imagery in his epistle as he claims that those who follow Christ are dominated by the role of priest, and not only are they priests they are of a "royal priesthood" (βασιλείον ἱεράτευμα). It is also noteworthy how in Peter's proclamation he alternates between a confession of sin and a proclamation of the mercy of God (1 Peter 2:9-25).

The sin confessed in Ezra is not simply for the people currently dwelling in the land but also for their ancestors. Some might see this as implying that Ezra is guilty of the sins of his ancestors, however that would go against Jeremiah 31:27-30 and Ezekiel 18:1-32 where there is an

indication of individual responsibility for sins. Certainly with sin there is a consequence to sin, and if one's ancestors sin and they receive that consequence there is often an effect on those that follow. The sin here is doubly severe because it appears Israel has still not learned crucial lessons from the past. Their ancestors sinned and the people were sent into captivity as a consequence of that sin. They, the current Judeans living in Judea, became slaves as a result of their ancestors forsaking their covenant with God.

The question arises were they slaves as punishment for their sins or were they slaves because they had not become partakers of the blessings of God as a result of obedience to covenant with him? Why would there be an expectation of blessings from a God with whom they have not had covenant relationship? This passage challenges us to examine the complex nature of cause and effect and of living inside and outside of covenant relationship with God. Not only were some of the people not living in covenant relationship with God they were actively seeking other

covenant relationships through their intermarriages with these other people and their gods.

There is no reason that they should have expected favor from God. This would be the case if they have no covenant relationship, there should be nothing expected from God. If they are claiming covenant relationship and they are breaking that covenant through their sin, they should expect the curses of the covenant from a faithful covenant partner (i.e. God). Despite not having any right whatsoever to expect favor from God, He had graciously granted it anyway during this moment, by leaving them a remnant and giving them a stake in the temple and in the land. They clearly recognized that their presence in the land and their favored position in the sight of the Persian king was the result of the favor of God. God had not forsaken them (9:8-9), but granted them favor and an opportunity to claim the fullness of his blessings, the fullness of the benefits of covenant relationship with God.

These blessings cannot be claimed in the midst of clear expressions of faithlessness. The call is to step toward



God in faith and trust by moving toward keeping the covenant God had made with their ancestors. They were not to take nor give their sons and daughters in marriage. This act was a clear expression of not trusting God, but instead they were trusting their own resourcefulness and in human agency rather than the power of God. They could see that God was indeed merciful, punishing them far less than their sins deserved (9:13). The call here is to learn from the past and not to repeat the failures of those who had gone before.

Ezra's prayer ends with a clear and powerful expression of guilt, with no hope of vindication, but also by giving this confession there is clearly the hope for mercy from God. Why else would a person confess, if there were not in some way the idea that there is still hope, and here the hope rests in their experience of God as merciful and beneficent God. There is also the implication that a response is expected from the people to this prayer which is not only a prayer to God, but also an appeal for the people to join with Ezra. Today we express our agreement to

corporate prayer with the appellation of the simple Aramaic word *Amen* (let it be so). This is how the corporate body of God's people expresses agreement with the prayer of the one leading that prayer. It is more than a tradition.

10:1-5 – This chapter begins with a response from the people that began even while Ezra was praying, confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God. A large crowd gathered, and one might be forgiven for thinking that they gathered just to observe the spectacle in the way that people gather around an accident or incident today, but this appears to be more than that, at least at some point. The people “wept bitterly” and Shecaniah addresses Ezra with a message that begins with confession and a clear acknowledgement that they had broken faith with God, but it also contains an element of hope that reflects that they know the nature of God. Shecaniah recognizes the merciful and gracious nature of God (verse 2).

Then comes a call for action beyond the confession and hope. The call is to make a covenant with God to send away all the wives and the children from their midst. Just

think about the agony and consequences for the children and the women here. This is a major thing even though it only covers a few words here in scripture. What had likely been intended to foment and cement relationships with the people of the land was now most likely going to make things far worse than not ever having entered into those relationships at all. The amount of animosity and misunderstanding with the locals would be tremendous, but despite this, the call for repentance goes out (verse 4).

At this point Ezra stands up and makes the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear to follow this path. The implication is that not only does this sin run through the ranks of these people the consequence of this decision will effect the whole of the people. The call is to step into this decision, to make this covenant together, and they do.

10:6-19 – Ezra does not return home but remains in the temple precincts, where he goes to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. This reference has been the source of a great deal of discussion regarding the dating of Ezra. Briefly, the facts are that Eliashib is a common name.

There are three men that have that name in the list at the end of this chapter. It was a name carried by the high priest in the time of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 3:1), and it is the case that he can be identified with the man of that name in the list of the high priestly family in Nehemiah 12:10-11, in the list of the high priests in Nehemiah 12:22, and in 13:28. It is not agreed that he is to be identified with “Eliashib the priest” who was appointed to serve over the chamber of the house of God (Nehemiah 13:4, 7). It is not agreed either whether this Eliashib referred to in Ezra 10:6 refers to the same or another Eliashib.<sup>8</sup>

Jehohanan (and its variant Johanan) is also a name that is very common. It is mentioned in Nehemiah 12:13, in Nehemiah 12:22-33 in a list of priests and there is also a reference in the Elephantine papyri<sup>9</sup> referring to man by this name as high priest. It is almost certain that this man is to be identified as the high priest in the time of Nehemiah.

The letter from Elephantine is dated to 408 BC and indicates

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<sup>8</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> B19:18 Aramaic Texts – Bezalel Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, Second Revised Edition (Atlanta GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), p. 144.

that Jehohanan was active as high priest three years earlier. There are however further difficulties with the exact dating of this figure, in Ezra. All in all when all the evidence is considered the bottom line is that the evidence is too tenuous to base a date upon for dating this man, by that name in the book of Ezra.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that fasting from both food and water was a rarity in the Old Testament. Moses fasted in this manner twice (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:18). The people of Nineveh fasted in this manner when repenting (Jonah 3:7). Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews of Susa fasted in this way for three days before Esther approached Xerxes (Esther 4:15-16). The fact that Ezra goes to this extreme underscores his view of the severity of the sin of the Judeans here.<sup>11</sup>

A proclamation (verse 7) then goes out to call for an assembly of all the returned exiles. It is important to note here that the problem of taking foreign wives is not an issue that is encountered with those who remained behind during

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<sup>10</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 151-154.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 354.

the Babylonian exile, this is a problem with those that returned from exile. The proclamation is to be enforced with the confiscation of the property for those who do not come within the specified time, and with them being banned from the “congregation” (קִהְלָה Septuagint ἐκκλησίας the word which we translate as church in the New Testament) of the exiles.

The order was followed and everyone assembled within the period of the three days. The weather was miserable and the indication is that they assembled in the open square (verse 9), in December and they trembled not only because of the weather but also because of the matter facing them. Ezra then stands up and begins to speak (verse 10) and accuses them of increasing the guilt of Israel by marrying foreign women. He calls upon them to make confession of their sin and to follow God. It is noteworthy here that confession is not considered sufficient by itself, a turning from sin is also needed. Note the similarities here with the call of Peter in Acts 2:38 where he calls for repentance after their confession of guilt.

The assembly (ἐκκλησία - ἡ ἐκκλησία – again in the Septuagint the word used here, verse 12, is the word we translate as church) all agree and say it should be as Ezra has said. They develop a plan, because of the season and the time required to send the rulers (ῥῶ) to investigate all the men who had married foreign wives (verse 14). Ezra had spoken in such a way as to give the impression that there was the possibility of the fierce wrath of God falling upon the community because of their faithlessness.<sup>12</sup>

There was opposition, but the question is to what were they opposed? Were they opposed to this more lengthy process, to the divorce of the foreign women? Depending upon what it was that they opposed they are either more liberal or perhaps more conservative here than Ezra. It is difficult, if not impossible to decide absolutely between the choices. Looking at all the evidence, it seems likely that if they had opposed the divorces then some form of admonishment would have been expected. In light of this it is likely that these four men wanted an immediate

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<sup>12</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 155-156.

resolution to the problem, one without the delay. If this is the case then they agreed with the outcome but not the procedure.<sup>13</sup> This then would have meant that in no sense were they opposed to what God's will was in this instance; their disagreement was with the procedure proposed by human agency.

The women were sent away and guilt offerings were made by those who had taken foreign wives (verses 18-19). The names of all those that were guilty are listed and the book of Ezra ends with the line that the women were sent away along with their children. All the potential for contamination was removed from among the people of Israel. It should be noted in this there is no indication of any immediate prophetic message prompting their actions, they rely upon the words of God that they already possessed in scripture. They seek to follow this word and the account here was intended to inspire others to be obedient to the revealed will of God, as found in scripture.

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 360.



It is noteworthy that emphasis is upon this aspect of the law, marrying foreign women. Perhaps they were also observing all other aspects of the law, but if that were the case then this truly is a unique time in the history of the people of Israel. It seems likely that this was a glaring instance of them not following the word of God that cut across lines of society, from the people, to the Levites, even to the priests. Until this glaring sin was dealt with there was not much reason to deal with the other areas of sinfulness that will have certainly been a part of community life.

Lessons can be learned from the book of Ezra for life in the twenty-first century. Their focus on the word of God should be noted. Their focus on what they believe is a God ordained task, like the rebuilding of the temple is maintained in spite of hardship and resistance. Their focus is not only on the short-term mission but the long-term goal, the end game, as the people through whom the Messiah would come, causes them to change their earthly behavior to align with the will of God. It is certain that they do not

fully understand all the implications of God's commands to them. They are called to obey. They are a people inspired by the calling of God to do impossible things in His name.

## Synopsis

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This section of the Book of Ezra deals primarily with the issue of intermarrying with foreign women. Though this is the primary backdrop the issues that are primary have more to do with obedience and a clear recognition of the mercy of God. Ezra is made aware of the sin of the people in intermarrying and his reaction is both immediate and dramatic. This reaction also causes a rapid and dramatic reaction from the people, at least those that “trembled at the words of God.”

Ezra delivers a great prayer up before God confessing the sins of the people, while on his knees and with his face down. In this prayer he acknowledges the great mercy of God and his blessing of the people far beyond what they deserved. In a real sense this prayer reflect the reality that none can stand before God and the only hope for any is in reality based in the great mercy of God.

The people respond to this prayer and acknowledge their sin and call for the foreign wives to be sent away, with

their children. A meeting is called of all of those returned from exile and it is decided to send out the rulers to investigate all that have taken foreign wives and ultimately they and their children are sent away. This sin even reached into the midst of the Levites and the Priests of Israel.

It should be noted that this gathering of the people is referred to in the Septuagint using the word that we translate into English as church. The sin that they confessed was not done on an individual basis, there was corporate responsibility and corporate action was taken to insure corporate purity. The words of Scripture play a prominent role in convicting the people of their sin and in insuring a resolution was found that removed the sin from the midst of the congregation.

## Main Points

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1. The sin of individuals effects the whole congregation of God's people.
2. The mission of God is more important than the needs or desires of the individual.
3. Scripture provides a means for God to communicate with His people.
4. God is exceedingly merciful.

# Questions

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1. Does sin in the life of the individual affect the whole of the church today? Why or why not?
2. How do you think the church should deal with sin among the people of the church?
3. What are the lessons that we should learn from the Book of Ezra about dealing with sin?
4. How do you react to sin in the church?
5. What is sin?
6. Why does sin matter?
7. How does this book affect your view of marriage?  
Why?
8. What should we expect from God if we are disobedient?
9. Are there some sins that are private? If so what are they? If not, why not?
10. Why should the church today seek to abstain from sin?