

# MOUNTAIN OF MERCY

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 9

Ninth Message

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*Ezra 9*

**Ezra 9:1a, 3:**

**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 surrounding peoples and their detestable practices.” As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.**

[Walk up on stage. Tear clothes, shave beard, sit silently.]

Last week we heard about a celebration. Ezra and his companions had successfully completed a 900-mile journey carrying great wealth from Persia to Jerusalem. Upon arriving, they threw a huge party.

This week the tone of our passage is completely different. Ezra reacts dramatically to some difficult news. He is overwhelmed with grief and pain, so much so that he makes a public display of his mourning. This morning we’re going to find out what led to this kind of disappointment.

We are in the middle of a series in the book of Ezra called “Return and Rebuild.” This book takes place in the 5th century BC and follows a group of Jews as they return from exile in Persia to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. At this point, the temple has been completed, and the new community in Jerusalem is settling into a new rhythm of life and worship.

Throughout the story, we’ve seen the Jews face several external obstacles—opposition from their neighbors, uncertainty, dangerous journeys and the like. But today, we see them encounter a problem that comes from within. Certain people have made decisions that go against the values of their community. Next week we’ll see how the community responds. This week, the focus is on how Ezra himself responds.

Ezra's immediate response, as we've already encountered, is to grieve the sin of his people. We can learn so much from how he processes his grief, because the first thing he does is turn to God with a powerful prayer. As we listen to his words, we will discover that he knows something about God that we need to constantly be reminded of: our God is a mountain of mercy.

Ezra isn't just upset because of one thing that happened. He's discouraged because this mistake is one more failure in a long series for God's people. It shows him clearly just how broken our communities can be. Even after years of trying. Even with the presence of God in our midst. Even with all the right instruction. Ezra is worried for the future of his people. Why can't they seem to get it right?

This is always an important question for us. We love to do family dedications at PBC because it points us toward the future. We're optimistic about what the next generation will become and do and experience. But what is our hope for the next generation based on?

Some people think that over time the world is getting better. Each successive generation fixes one more set of problems and gradually improves the world. But it doesn't take much to look around and dispel that notion. How can you think that the fundamental character of humanity is improving over time? Some things might get better. Other things get worse. We are surrounded constantly by the brokenness of the world around us. And when we're honest, we see that we are broken inside as well.

What is the solution? How can we dare to have hope for the next generation? How do we look forward when people keep making the same mistakes over and over again?

Watching Ezra respond to a wake-up call about his community will help us face those questions. First, we'll dig deeper into the particular problem that he becomes aware of. Then we'll look at his response. The longest part of our passage is Ezra's prayer to God. In response

to the brokenness of his world, he turns to God. What he knows about God allows us to face the brokenness in our own world and hearts.

## The problem

The story begins with disappointing news.

**Ezra 9:1-2:**

**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. 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.”**

Ezra is told that the Jewish returnees “have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands.” The particular thing they are doing is to intermarry with the “peoples of the lands.” In particular, there are eight foreign nations mentioned. One commentator called this list a “who’s who of Israel’s enemies.” What made intermarriage such a big deal for the Jews in the 5th century?

I remember the first time one of my children told me “no.” I was stunned. As a new parent, you’re overwhelmed with the responsibility of keeping this tiny creature alive. Eating, sleeping, developmental milestones—all of your thoughts go towards making sure everything is working the way it’s supposed to.

My job was to ensure the health of this person. So it was a shock to hear them reject my efforts at doing so. In that simple word was a violation of the nature of our relationship. A parent looks out for their children. They have knowledge and experience, and understanding that the child doesn’t. So for a child to say “no” to a parent is to challenge that essence of that relationship.

The issue that Ezra has become aware of is that after all that God has done for his people, they continue to tell him “no.”

God explained early on why marrying foreigners was a dangerous thing to do.

**Deuteronomy 7:3-4:**

**You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.**

Here is the issue: “they would turn away your sons from following me.”

The problem is not in the marrying of foreign women. The problem is that this behavior might fracture their relationship with God. In fact, this was the issue that they dealt with for centuries. Over and over again, the Israelites rejected the essence of their relationship with God. They chose to worship idols instead of the living God.

Now they are back in their land. Now they have the chance to be God’s people. God has restored them. Right away, they’ve chosen to do something that threatens to throw away that restoration. So what if they are back in Jerusalem. So what if they have a new temple. So what if they live in the Promised Land. If they don’t have a relationship with God, all of it was for nothing.

The question we have to ask is, “What are the things in our culture which tempt us to turn away from following God?” What practices or beliefs, or actions might not be all that bad in and of themselves, except that they distract you from the most important part of life? What distracts you from God?

I think a lot of us can relate to the Jews in Jerusalem. Think about all the change they’ve experienced. They grew up in Persia. They relocated to a different part of the world. They are trying to rebuild—not just the temple, but their entire culture. It’s an overwhelming responsibility, and there are a lot of challenges.

It must have seemed easier to do their best to fit in. Learn from the people who already live in the land. Settle into a way of life that feels easier and seems to make more sense.

It’s a temptation that all of us face. It’s vulnerable to be different, think differently, and value different things than the people around us. It’s always much easier to fit in and to be like the people around you.

It's no mistake that the issue in Jerusalem has to do with romantic relationships. There's a list in Leviticus 18 of practices that draw people away from God. Seventeen of the 18 behaviors have to do with sex. God gave us the gift of sex and romance as a mirror of our relationship with him. It's a powerful gift. But because of its power, sex can be incredibly destructive as well.

Most people would agree that there is a lot of sexual brokenness in our culture. They may disagree on what qualifies as brokenness. But virtually everyone—Christian and non-Christian alike—would say that sexual brokenness is everywhere. And that brokenness—or what the Bible calls “sin”—has a unique power to distract us from God. That was true in Jerusalem in 500 BC, and it's true in Palo Alto in 2021.

What distracts you from God?

## The response

The Jews in Jerusalem are in a dangerous place. They have entered into marriages that, in all likelihood, will lead them away from following God. If that happens, all the effort of returning and rebuilding will be wasted. That's why Ezra reacts so deeply.

**Ezra 9:3-5:**

**As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 4 Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. 5 And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God,**

This is what I modeled for you. I tore my garment, shaved my beard, and sat appalled. Ezra allowed the depth of this situation to affect him deeply. His first response was deep sadness. Not anger or frustration. Sadness.

Notice how what began with him then spread to others. We hear that “all who trembled at the word of God” came to him. His grief created a space for others to mourn as well. It becomes a catalyst for the community. It starts with him, but it gives others the permission to grieve as well. One person's lament unlocks the same response for others.

You can imagine how the problem started for these ancient Jews. One person decides to marry an Amorite. Everyone looks around to see how people react. Nobody says anything. So the next person marries a Hittite. Again, no one says anything. So another marries an Egyptian. Nobody seems to care.

The entire culture of the group begins to change.

The same effect also works in the opposite direction. When Ezra hears the news and reacts, a new force is unleashed. The people who were uncomfortable with what had happened but didn't say anything joined him. His reaction becomes an example to others. He reverses the course of the river.

Ezra took sin seriously, and it changed his community.

What about you? How do you react to brokenness? We can learn from Ezra to take sin seriously.

I resonate with Ezra here because what I see in his response is a recognition of the deep brokenness of the world. Ezra's behavior is similar to what a person would do when another person dies. These are rites of mourning. He takes this news so seriously that he reacts as if someone has died. It's an appropriate thing to do because something has died.

I think we can learn a lot here from Ezra. Honestly, I'm concerned that saying “take sin seriously” will be interpreted as “be more eager to tell other people how sinful they are.” While there might be times we need more boldness to confront others, Ezra's initial response is different.

He doesn't begin with people. He begins with simply being overcome by the brokenness of the world. He takes that grief to God in prayer. His example invites us to follow.

## The prayer

We are told that Ezra stood up around the time of the evening sacrifice. That's around 3 pm. It's the time when a crowd would have been gathered. Ezra turns his grief into a public invitation. Listen to the beginning.

**Ezra 9:6-7a:**

**“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. 7 From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt.**

Notice how Ezra starts by saying, “I am ashamed to lift my face,” but then very quickly, he’s talking about “our iniquities.” That’s incredible to me. Not only is he associating himself with the people of his community that married foreign women, but he’s also claiming guilt for the generations before him who walked away from God.

If someone accuses me of something, my first reaction is usually to be defensive. Ezra’s instinct is the opposite. He wasn’t even the one being accused, but he took on the sin of the community as if it belonged to him. No excuses. No defense. Nothing but sorrow and repentance.

Ezra continues to explain how terrible this latest failure is.

**Ezra 9:8:**

**But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.**

The word for “secure hold” literally refers to a tent peg. That’s something the Israelites would have been very familiar with, especially after journeying across the desert. God gave them a tent peg to secure themselves to. He showed them favor.

That’s why Ezra is incredulous that they could mess up everything so quickly.

**Ezra 9:10:**

**“And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments,**

Even after you gave us remnant. Even after you brought us out of exile. Even after you gave us millions of dollars from the Persian government. We still blew it. Again and again and again.

Ezra concludes in complete humility. Listen to the end of his prayer in verse 15.

**Ezra 9:15:**

**O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.”**

None can stand before you. Ezra’s confession is absolute. We messed up. End of story.

When was the last time you confronted someone, and this was their response? Can you even imagine it? You say something like, “When you don’t answer my emails right away, I feel like you don’t value me as a person.” And they respond, “You’re absolutely right. I have no excuse. I am totally and completely at fault.”

What gives Ezra the courage to confess like this? How is he able to avoid being defensive toward God?

Remember how we were introduced to Ezra. He “set his heart to study the law of God.” Ezra knows God deeply through God’s revelation in the Scriptures.

Centuries earlier, God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Their leader Moses had gone up on a mountain to meet with God. While he was up there, God’s people created a golden calf and began to worship it. This was only days after a miraculous rescue from Egypt.

Listen to how God describes himself in the aftermath of that event.

**Exodus 34:6-7:**

**The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”**

In response to the failures of his people, God describes himself as “a God merciful and gracious.” He does not let people off the hook. He does not ignore sin. But he is slow to anger and quick to mercy. He is patient with failure. It takes a long time for him to get angry. But when his people come to him in repentance, mercy is immediate.



This is what Ezra understood. This is why he was able to be completely humble and throw himself at God's feet. He knew he could rely on the mercy of God. Ezra says that the guilt of his people has risen to the heavens, but he knows that God's mercy goes even higher. He knows that God is a mountain of mercy.

This is what I want us to remember: we can trust God's mercy.

I think some of us have a hard time believing that God is merciful. It makes sense. True mercy is rare in our world. Mercy involves forgiveness. Mercy involves a recognition of wrong and a willingness to forgive.

Think about your relationships. Is there someone in your life whom you have wronged—undeniably, inexcusably wronged—and yet you're still in a relationship with them? If so, then you've experienced mercy. It's an incredible thing. Some of us have tasted mercy from our spouses, our parents, our children or our friends. But maybe some of you feel like you've never received true mercy from another.

Now think about God. He describes himself as "a God merciful and gracious." That is who he is. We have to try in order to be merciful. We have to fight against being vindictive or petty or holding a grudge. For God, mercy flows naturally. Mercy is core to who he is.

Do you know the mercy of God? Do you really believe it in your heart? Or do you think he's waiting for you to mess up one more time so he can catch you in sin? When you fail again and again and again, do you think he's going to say "enough is enough" and finally give up on you?

If God's mercy were an ocean, you could never swim to the bottom. If God's mercy were a tree, you could never climb to the top. If God's mercy were a path, you could never reach the end of the road. As deep as our sin and brokenness are, they are finite. God's mercy is infinite.

Ezra knew God's mercy because he knew the Bible inside and out. That gave him the freedom to completely mourn the brokenness of his community. When we know that mercy is on the other side, we can be completely honest with sin—ours, others', and the world's.

Throwing ourselves at the mercy of God is our only hope. It also happens to be the best hope we could ask for.

## Conclusion

Preachers have the same problem with illustrations that advertisers have with commercials. We remember the funny commercial, but we forget the product being advertised.

You might be tempted to remember this sermon as the one where I tore my shirt and shaved on stage. But here's my plea: remember why I did those things. Remember why Ezra did those things.

Ezra mourned for the sin and brokenness of his community. He grieved because he saw the desperate situation we are all in. Nothing will break the cycle of sin and evil in our world. People aren't getting better. The next generation won't get it right where we got it wrong.

Ezra was able to mourn because he knew who God is. He knew of God's mercy. And how much more should we be convinced of the mercy of God. We've seen the rest of the story. We've seen God not only forgive but send his son to die in our place so that we can be restored. Ezra saw God's mercy. We've seen what that mercy cost—we've seen his son on a cross.

Ezra showed us a powerful example of two critical truths this morning. First, this world is broken beyond repair. Second, God's mercy is enough.

Don't remember this Sunday as the day I tore my shirt and shaved on stage. Remember this Sunday as the day you saw a graphic reminder that our God is a mountain of mercy.