

DRASTIC MEASURES

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 10

Final Message

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Ezra 10

When I was fourteen years old, I was sitting with a friend on my front lawn, killing time. Both of us were bored and didn't know what to do with our evening. When teenage boys meet boredom, the results are not always favorable.

We were sitting next to our peach tree, and one of us—I don't remember who—thought it would be a good idea to throw peaches at passing cars. The other of us agreed, so we headed off to the orchard with a handful of ripe peaches, took aim, and fired away. Another friend heard of what we had done, so three of us headed out to the orchard a week or so later.

This went on for a few weeks, but eventually, we needed a new thrill. Therefore, one of us—I don't remember who—thought it would be a good idea if we could get our victims to chase us. So, that's what we tried to do—and we were successful on a few occasions, if you want to call it that. In reality, we were never in danger, because we knew of a secret escape route.

Eventually, a few other guys in the neighborhood got wind of what we were doing, and they formed their own peach-throwing contingent. Sin, if you will, spread through the neighborhood.

In Ezra 9, sin spread through Israel. Large numbers of Israelite men married foreign women who worshiped other gods. In Ezra 10, Ezra, a leader in Israel, responds. He takes drastic measures. Watch for three key words: “transgressed,” “guilt,” and “wrath.”

Hope for Israel

Ezra 10:1-5:

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons

of Elam, addressed Ezra: “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord[a] and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. 4 Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” 5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.

Ezra, a leader of Israel, and “a very great assembly” of Israelites weep together because so many of their men have married foreign women. Ezra confesses to the Lord in behalf of Israel, and the great assembly mirrors him, but is there anything they can do?

Shecaniah approaches Ezra with a proposal. First, though, he acknowledges the gravity of Israel's sin. Israel, or at least a large part of Israel, has “broken faith” with the Lord by willfully breaking his law that he had given them. The Lord instructed them not to intermarry with the people of the land so that they would not be drawn away to worship other gods, but they have broken faith with the Lord on a massive scale (Exodus 34:16, Deuteronomy 7:1-4, Ezra 9:10-12).

The Lord had sent the Israelites into exile because of their idolatry, but now that they're back in the land, they're dabbling with idolatry again. Nevertheless, Shecaniah believes that there is “hope for Israel” if Ezra leads it to adopt his seemingly extreme proposal, which involves divorcing foreign wives and children.

Shecaniah's proposal didn't come out of the blue, for it was in line with the counsel of both Ezra, whom Shecaniah calls “my lord,” and those who “trembled” because of the breaking of the commandment prohibiting the marrying of foreign women (Ezra 9:4).¹

Ezra, a priest who both knows the law and does the law, responds by rallying the leading priests and all Israel to take an oath in agreement with Shecaniah's proposal.

God's design for marriage

The essence of sin is turning away from God and turning to other gods (Romans 3:11-12, Colossians 3:5). It is "breaking faith." Breaking faith with God then inevitably manifests itself in sinful decisions and actions that go against God's design for humanity. The Jews in Ezra 10 first broke faith with God and then sinned by marrying foreigners who worshiped other gods.

God's design for his people today, if they choose to marry, is that they marry fellow believers in Christ. If your purpose is to know God and glorify him forever, then a marriage partner who doesn't share that purpose will hinder you from fulfilling it. In fact, a marriage partner who doesn't share that purpose is likely to draw you away from serving that purpose. If, on the other hand, a marriage partner shares that purpose, then you can know God and glorify him together.

If you're single, if you're a believer, and if you'd like to be married, your priorities in searching for a partner should be, in this order, faith, character, and feelings. I have much more to say on this matter, and I've said it elsewhere, but if you want my full treatment, I'd be happy to meet with you.² Make an appointment.

But what if you've already married an unbeliever, or what if the believer you thought you married is now an unbeliever? Or, what if you've sinned in a big way? Or, what if, say, an entire church sins on a massive scale? Is there hope?

What does Ezra do?

Ezra mourns for Israel

Ezra 10:6-8:

Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles. 7 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 and that if anyone did not come

within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles.

The exiles have been "faithless": they have "broken faith" with the Lord by marrying foreign women. Ezra goes into isolation to mourn for the state of Israel. At some point, all the returned exiles are summoned to Jerusalem. The seriousness of the issue at hand is highlighted by the severity of the punishment for those who don't come to Jerusalem. Those who don't come to Jerusalem will be like the women some of them have married: foreigners.

The lesser of two evils

Ezra 10:9-11:

Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. 11 Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

Twice so far some of the returned exiles have trembled because the command of God has been broken (Ezra 9:4, 10:3). Now "all the people," who have come to Jerusalem, tremble not only because of "this matter" but also because of the heavy rain.

Ezra echoes Shecaniah when he proclaims, "You have broken faith and married foreign women." The result is that they have "increased guilt in Israel" and thus put at risk God's plan to establish them in the promised land once again. The exile, which was God's discipline for the idolatry of his people, didn't fix the problem. Israel is back in the land, but it is repeating the sins that brought about the exile in the first place.

Ezra instructs them first to confess their sins to God and second to do God's will. The problem began with breaking faith. It proceeded to joining the peoples of the land, who worshiped other gods. It culminated with marrying women of the land who worshiped other gods.

Therefore, God's will in this case is that they separate from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.

Divorce in this case is the lesser of two evils. The greater evil is the presence of idolatry among the returned exiles and the threat that it will spread throughout the rest of the people. Ezra must do damage control.

Serious matters

In the church, we need to take sin seriously. Breaking faith with God and then worshiping the modern gods of money, power, sex, and success, for example, are serious matters. If we don't take such matters seriously, then sin can spread in the church. For example, the cultural pressure for the church to redefine its sexual ethics is enormous, but such pressure must be resisted. If it isn't, then sin can easily spread through the church so that non-biblical positions are not only tolerated but also endorsed.

Allowing sin to spread in the church puts God's intention for the church to be salt and light at risk. The apostle Paul therefore instructs the Corinthian church to take sin seriously and warns it: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6) If we don't take sin seriously, then we would do well to follow the returned exiles: we should tremble.

When I was throwing peaches at cars, I was not inclined to take sin seriously. Then I heard that when the renegade group went out one night, one of its members, wanting more of a thrill, threw not a peach at a passing car but a cherry bomb. That scared me. I began to take what I had been doing seriously. I stopped throwing peaches at cars.

Do the people in Ezra 10 take sin seriously?

The people agree

Ezra 10:12-17:

Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said. 13 But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. 14 Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath

of our God over this matter is turned away from us." 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

16 Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers' houses, according to their fathers' houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter; 17 and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

The people who have come to Jerusalem agree that the men must separate from their foreign wives, but because so many men have married foreign women, sorting everything out will take time, and the heavy rains are liable to thwart their efforts. Therefore, the people propose a solution that begins with only the officials meeting and with the guilty men coming in stages.

Shecaniah had held out hope for Israel, and the people hope that their repentance will turn away the fierce wrath of God so that they will be able to continue living in the land that he promised them.

Four men are said to be in opposition—not to the proposal to separate from foreign wives, for "all the assembly" consented. Instead, they are seemingly opposed to the way the separations will be carried out. In any event, "only" four are opposed.

The immensity of the problem is seen in the fact that it took them three months to "examine the matter" and "come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women."

What if we have "greatly transgressed"? Is there hope?

Sin on a massive scale

Ezra 10:18-44:

Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers. 19 They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. 20 Of

the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. 21 Of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. 22 Of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasa.

23 Of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.

25 And of Israel: of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. 26 Of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. 27 Of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons of Bebai were Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 Of the sons of Bani were Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. 30 Of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 Of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu. 38 Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. 44 All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.

Even some priests were guilty of marrying foreign women. Ezra was a priest who set his heart to “do” the law. These priests were different. However, they pledged to put away their wives, and they made an offering for their guilt. In all, about one hundred men were found to have married foreign women.

What happened to the women after they were sent away? The narrator doesn’t say, but if history is any indication, they returned to the houses from which they came (Genesis 38:11, Ruth 1:8).

With that, the book of Ezra comes to an end—perhaps a less-than-satisfying end. However, the story continues in the book of Nehemiah. Even so, at the end of the end of Nehemiah, men of Israel are marrying foreign women again (Nehemiah 13:23-29). The exile didn’t fix the problem. The drastic measures under Ezra didn’t fix the problem. Something even more drastic is necessary to deal with the problem of sin, which is rooted in idolatry: the turning away from God to worship other gods.

Paul’s instructions

So, if you’re married to an unbeliever, should you divorce that person? The fact that the sin of intermarriage arises in the next book in the Scriptures and that Nehemiah did not propose divorce should persuade us that divorce in the case of intermarriage is not a timeless approach. In the book of Ezra, the nation of Israel was being re-established in the land, and drastic measures were necessary.

Indeed, when we come to the New Testament, Paul, who no doubt knew the book of Ezra, instructs believers in Corinth who are married to unbelieving spouses to remain married to them. He holds out hope that a believing spouse can influence an unbelieving spouse toward Christ (1 Corinthians 7:13-16).

Different kind of exile

The problem of sin is immense, infecting not just a hundred of us but all of us: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). If we have greatly transgressed, is there hope for us? Can anything be done about our guilt? Can anything turn away the fierce wrath of God? The apostle Paul in the New Testament reminds us, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . .” (Romans 1:18).

The book of Ezra demonstrates that the exile didn’t fix the problem of sin. The Jews repeated the sins of their forefathers. Yes, they then took drastic measures, but drastic measures didn’t fix the problem. Something even more drastic is necessary, a different kind of exile.

Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He was forsaken by God. He went into exile!

If we have greatly transgressed, the prophet Isaiah tells us, even centuries before the coming of Christ, “But

he was pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5). If we are guilty before God, Isaiah tells us that “his soul makes an offering for guilt” (Isaiah 53:10). If our transgressions and guilt merit the fierce wrath of God, Paul tells us, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9).

As a result, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2). Having been “justified by his grace,” we are “heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7).

Christ goes into exile for us. He was pierced for our transgressions. He offered himself for our guilt. He absorbed the wrath of God and turned it away from us. Yes, there is hope. There is hope for eternal life, culminating in the new promised land, the new creation.

For those of us who believe in Christ and have greatly transgressed, there is hope! Confess! Turn to Christ! Accept God’s forgiveness of you! The drastic measures have already been taken, and the Father is waiting with open arms. You cannot out-sin the grace of God.

At the age of eighty-two, John Newton, a former slave trader who repented, turned to Christ, and then wrote “Amazing Grace,” said, “Although my memory’s fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”

Paralyzed by love

Listen again to Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Listen to it, as best you can, with the Father’s heart.

How can the Father listen to his Son’s cry and not answer him? He could have moved heaven and earth—literally. He could have jumped off his throne. Why does the Father hold himself back? How can the Father hold himself back? This is, after all, his Son, his beloved Son.

What keeps the Father from saving his Son? It’s love. It’s love for us. The Father is paralyzed by his love for you.

Listen again to Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Listen to it, as best you can, with the Son’s heart.

The bystanders had mockingly urged Jesus to come down from the cross. To them it was a joke. To Jesus it

is as real as the nails in his hands. He could have called on more than twelve legions of angels. He could have come down from the cross. Instead, he cries out to the Father. And as the Father holds himself back, the Son holds himself back from saving himself.

What keeps the Son from saving himself? It’s love. It’s love for us. The Son is paralyzed by his love for you.

The Father could have come down from his throne. The Son could have come down from the cross. The Father holds himself back from saving his Son, and the Son holds himself back from saving himself. Instead of forsaking us, the Father forsakes his Son, and the Son is forsaken—and we are saved. Sin is far more destructive than we think, but God loves us far more than we know.

Is there hope for us? Oh my!

Jesus was pierced for our transgressions. He made a guilt offering for us. He saves us from the wrath of God.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, please confess your sins and turn to him. If you do, you will have eternal life, which will begin for you now. Jesus himself says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

Worship and seek

We’ve called our series in the book of Ezra “Return and Rebuild.” The Jews returned from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. We have returned, and we are continuing to return, from the pandemic to rebuild the temple in Palo Alto, which is, of course, our community. “For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). What has the Lord shown us in the book of Ezra?

Paul Taylor and I each preached from five chapters in the series. Paul told me the most important chapter he preached was Ezra 3. The most important chapter I preached was Ezra 7. These are the key chapters in the book.

In Ezra 3, when the first exiles returned, they built the altar first and offered burnt offerings on it. Then they built the foundation of the temple and celebrated the goodness of God. Worship was their priority.

Make worship a priority. Now, properly defined, all of life is worship, and there are many ways to worship. But, central to this community is our weekly worship service on Sunday mornings.

The pandemic has caused many people to deprioritize spiritual health, mental health, emotional health, and financial health. Many are still staying away from in-person worship services, some no doubt for good reasons, some perhaps for useful reasons, but wherever you are, make worship a priority—and come back to in-person worship services as soon as possible.

God made us to worship in community. “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Just as a reminder, we gather at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. in our new worship center and at 11 a.m. outside on our patio, which we’ve equipped with screens and speakers.

Whether or not you are ready to come back to in-person worship services, find a way to meet in person with other believers. “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

In Ezra 7, Ezra set his heart to “study” the word of God. I was intrigued to learn that the basic meaning for the word translated “study” is “seek.” When Ezra opened the word of God, he was seeking. Therefore, seek the word. Especially, seek God in the word.

As we return and rebuild, let’s make worship a priority and let’s seek God in the word. And let’s do it together.

Endnotes

1. Although Shecaniah asks that his proposal be adopted “according to the Law,” nothing in the law specifically instructs the Israelites to divorce foreign wives. He may therefore believe that his proposal is a specific application of the law for this time and place. Alternatively, he may be asking that his proposal is be carried out in a manner consistent with the law.
- 2 See https://cdn.pbc.org/Main_Service/2000/04/12/last_hurrah_2.pdf, <https://www.pbc.org/messages/boy-meets-girl>, https://www.pbc.org/sermons?enmse_mid=2189.