

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 6: Confession and Covenant Reform -- Ezra 9:1–10:44

Picture the moment. The walls of the temple are standing again. The altar smokes with the morning sacrifice. The exiles have come home from Babylon with the king's blessing and his gold, and for one shining season it looks as though the worst is finally behind God's people. Then the princes of Israel come to Ezra with a quiet, terrible report, and the bottom drops out. The people, and the priests, and even the Levites have not kept themselves separate from the surrounding nations. They have married into the very families whose idols had once dragged Israel into exile. The danger they survived has crept back in through the front door, dressed as ordinary married life.

Watch what Ezra does, because it tells you everything about a heart that loves God. He does not shrug and call it manageable. He does not launch a committee or compose a press release. He tears his garment and his robe, he pulls hair from his head and his beard, and he sits down stunned. Then, at the time of the evening sacrifice, he falls on his knees, spreads out his hands to the LORD, and prays one of the most honest prayers in all of Scripture. He says we, not they. He confesses the sin of the whole community as though it were his own, and in a sense it was, because that is what it means to belong to a people.

This is a hard lesson, and we should say so plainly at the start. Chapter 10 records the people covenanting to put away the foreign wives and the children, and few passages in the Old Testament land more heavily on a modern reader. We are going to handle this carefully and honestly, the way a faithful teacher handles a sharp tool. We will see why this action belonged to a particular moment under the Old Covenant, before the Messiah came, and we will see just as clearly why it is not a pattern God lays on a Christian husband or wife today. The apostle Paul, writing under the New Covenant, tells a believer married to an unbeliever to stay, not to leave (1 Corinthians 7:12–16). Both truths are God's truth, and we will hold them together.

But do not miss the warm center of this chapter while we work through the hard edges. Ezra 9 is a model of what real confession sounds like when a person finally stops making excuses and tells God the truth. It is corporate, it is unflinching, it is soaked in the memory of grace, and it ends not in despair but at the foot of the LORD's mercy. If you have ever wondered how to come clean before God, how to name a sin you have been managing instead of repenting of, this prayer is your tutor. Come and learn at Ezra's knees, and let the same God who heard him meet you.

Group Discussion: Ezra is so shaken by the people's sin that he tears his clothes, pulls his hair, and sits down appalled before he ever speaks a word (Ezra 9:3–4). When was the last time a sin, your own or your community's, actually grieved you that deeply? What does it tell us about a church, or a heart, when sin stops causing any grief at all?

Personal Reflection: In his prayer Ezra repeatedly says we and our, confessing the sin of the whole people as if it were his own, even though he personally had not married a foreign wife (Ezra 9:6–7). Where in your own life are you tempted to distance yourself from sin with a comfortable they, when God may be calling you to a humbler we? Name one situation this week where you could pray for and confess alongside others instead of standing apart from them.

Read Ezra 9:1–10:44

Study Questions

1. Ezra is told that the people, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands and have intermarried with them (Ezra 9:1–2). According to the text and passages like Deuteronomy 7:3–4, what was God actually guarding against in forbidding these marriages, and how is that danger different from a matter of mere ethnicity or nationality?
2. Ezra responds to the news not with a speech but with torn clothes, pulled hair, and stunned silence until the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:3–4). What in your life has lost the power to grieve you that probably should not have, and what would it look like for you to let God soften your conscience again?
3. Ezra prays, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God (Ezra 9:6). What does it mean that a godly man feels real shame over sin he did not personally commit, and how does healthy, God-directed shame differ from the crushing, hopeless shame that drives people away from God (compare 2 Corinthians 7:9–10)?
4. Throughout the prayer Ezra remembers God's past mercy, the remnant, the nail in the holy place, the little reviving in their bondage (Ezra 9:8–9). When you have to face a hard truth about yourself, do you tend to forget God's kindness or remember it? How might rehearsing God's mercy actually make honest confession easier rather than harder?

5. Ezra confesses that after all God had given them, they had broken His commandments again, and he asks, should we again break thy commandments (Ezra 9:10–14)? What does this prayer teach us about the seriousness of returning to a sin God has already rescued us from, and how does it warn against the idea that a person, once delivered, can never fall away?
6. Ezra ends his prayer by saying, we are before thee in our trespasses, for we cannot stand before thee because of this (Ezra 9:15). He offers no excuse and no bargain, only the truth laid bare before God. What sin have you been managing, explaining, or half-confessing that God may be inviting you simply to lay bare before Him without excuse?
7. While Ezra prays, weeping and falling down before the house of God, a great congregation gathers and weeps with him, and Shechaniah proposes that they make a covenant with God (Ezra 10:1–3). What does this scene show about how genuine repentance in one person can spread through a whole community, and what is the difference between mere emotion and a covenant to change?
8. The people gather in the rain, trembling, and agree to deal with the matter carefully and with time, appointing elders and judges rather than acting rashly (Ezra 10:9–14). Where in your own repentance are you tempted either to do nothing or to lurch into reckless action, and what would patient, orderly, deliberate obedience look like instead?
9. Chapter 10 records the people putting away their foreign wives and children, a painful action taken under the Old Covenant to guard the purity of God's people and the holy line through which the Messiah would come (Ezra 10:11–44). Read this alongside Paul's New Covenant instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, where a believer married to an unbeliever is told not to divorce but to remain. Why must we never use Ezra's action to justify breaking

up a marriage today, and what timeless truths about idolatry, being unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14), and the seriousness of sin does this hard chapter still teach the church?

10. Ezra met a devastating failure with confession, grief, and a return to God's word rather than with despair or denial. Name one specific way Jesus is using a hard truth about yourself, perhaps something this lesson has stirred up, to form His own honesty, repentance, and tender conscience in you, and what is one concrete step of obedience you will take this week in response?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 7:1–6, God's reason for forbidding intermarriage with idolatrous nations; Nehemiah 9:1–3, another scene of corporate confession by the returned exiles; Daniel 9:3–19, a model prayer of confession that says we like Ezra's; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1, the New Covenant call not to be unequally yoked and to cleanse ourselves; 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, Paul's instruction that a believer married to an unbeliever should remain and may sanctify the home

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