

EZRA: FAITH AND ACTION PREACHER

Bible Background – EZRA 9-10

Printed Text – EZRA 10:1-12

The People Confess Their Sin

10 While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him.

2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel.

3 Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God.

4 Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

5 So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath.

6 Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

7 Then a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles should come to Jerusalem.

8 Those who failed to come within three days would, if the leaders and elders so decided, forfeit all their property and be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

9 Within three days, all the people of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. This took place on December 19, and all the people were sitting in the square before the Temple of God. They were trembling both because of the seriousness of the matter and because it was raining.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: “You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel’s guilt.

11 So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women.”

12 Then the whole assembly raised their voices and answered, “Yes, you are right; we must do as you say!”

-----New Living Translation

Lesson Introduction

Old Testament Bible students are familiar with the cycle of sin, judgment, and repentance that chronicles the story of the nation of ancient Israel. It may be the natural response for the reader to pass judgment on the ancient Hebrew people, but it is more edifying when we study their joyful response to God's word once convicted of the sins that separated them from their God. In this lesson, we will examine how Ezra, a priest of the Temple, led the people to take action to repent and commit to correct their grave sins so that God restored them to covenant relationship.

Background: For decades, God sent many prophets to warn Israel and Judah that their disobedience and lack of repentance would ultimately lead to their destruction. These prophecies were fulfilled when Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC, followed by Judah's fall in 586 BC at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It was then that the Temple was destroyed. However, the Lord did not leave them without hope, promising the return of a remnant of the people, and rebuilding of the Temple (Jeremiah 27:22). This fulfillment began in 538 BC when Zerubbabel led the first group to Jerusalem to start rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1-6). The priest, Ezra, led a second group's return. Both returns were authorized and aided by unlikely sources—the kings of Persia, who had conquered Babylon. In this passage, we see Ezra addressing the people who appear to be heading down a similar sinful path as their forefathers. His focus becomes to lead the people to not only a physical return but a spiritual return of their hearts toward the one true God.

The Proposal

Ezra 10:1-4: After returning from exile, Ezra was confronted with the knowledge that there was an issue of mixed marriages in the remnant of the Jewish nation. This situation permeated through the nation, even among the priests and Levites (Ezra 9:1). Ezra, on realizing that this people were once again heading down the sinful path of their forefathers, showed outward contrition in the most extreme and emotional way. In prayer, confession, weeping and throwing himself to the ground, he showed contrition and humility. A great congregation of people joined him in his public act of mourning.

The sin of mixed marriage that was charged against the men of Israel was not based on race. After all, mixed multitudes were among those who left Egypt with the Israelites in the book of Exodus (Exodus 12:38). Rahab, the Canaanite from Jericho, married into the lineage of Jesus (Joshua 2). Ruth, the Moabite, married Boaz, and was an ancestor of King David (Ruth 1:16; 4). But these women forsook their idolatrous gods for the God of Israel. *Interracial* marriage was not banned in Israel. It was *interreligious* marriage that presented the danger of drawing the hearts of God's people away from Him to worship pagan gods. This was a serious sin for the remnant returning from exile who continued to disobey the Law. Ezra was in despair and a heaviness was in the hearts of those who mourned with him.

Then enters Shechaniah, the son of Jehiel. We know little about him and there are six different persons with that name mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah. But through this spokesperson we hear the message that 'things are bad, but we can still fix this!' With God, no situation is hopeless because

we can always repent, change our ways and God will restore. It is necessary to confess our sins, but we must also repair what is wrong—always possible, but sometimes it is not easy. Shechaniah said that for this, they needed a covenant or rather a renewal of the covenant that Israel had themselves broken. To make reparations, they must divorce their wives who worshiped pagan gods, and send away their children with them. Now the God who does not like divorce (Malachi 2:16, Matthew 19:16; Mark 10:9) would not order them to divorce these women if they were lawfully married. In fact, the word for divorce used here is *yasta* not the normal Hebrew term *kerithuth*. It implies that there was no religious covenant with these women, so it was not unlawful to send them away. Even more, Malachi 2:13-14 implies that the men divorced their lawfully wedded wives in order to marry the foreign women. Shecaniah proposes that Ezra, as the scholarly, divinely endowed leader, should move forward, instructing the people to correct this wrong now that all are aware of the sin.

The Oath

Ezra 10:5-6: Ezra called all of the leaders of the community to take an oath that they would repent and do as instructed under the threat of severe penalty. Now there would be a binding covenant over the entire community. But even after the promises were made, Ezra returned to the Temple and continued to fast and pray, in mourning for the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

The Proclamation

Ezra 10:7-8: To complete the process of repentance, a gathering was proclaimed for all of Judah to come to Jerusalem in three days and for all who do not come, their property and land would be confiscated, and they would be excommunicated from the assembly. Ezra is fully aware of how difficult it will be for them to put away their wives and give up their children. He also knows that some will not want to do it. But he remains insistent on the people being faithful to God's law and makes it clear that if they are unable to commit to keeping the law, they will be separated from the congregation and lose their inheritance.

The Affirmation

Ezra 10:9-12: All the men from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the remnant of the nation of Israel who came out of Exile, returned to Jerusalem within the three-day time frame. They gathered in the square before the Temple of God. They assembled outside under heavy rain in a cold season. They shivered from the seriousness of the matter and from the cold rain. No matter the physical challenge, the situation was urgent and could not be postponed. Ezra called upon them to confess their transgressions to a just and holy God who does not tolerate sin. But, God is also merciful and is ready to forgive those who come to Him in humility. Confession would not be enough. Action must be taken to correct the wrong. They must separate themselves from the people of the land (and their idolatrous practices) and from the foreign wives they had taken. The wives and the children would return to their families. The entire assembly decided that that was the thing they must do.

Conclusion

Like Israel, we may find ourselves in a continual cycle of sin. And like Israel, we must remember that God is just and holy and confession of sin is necessary to begin the process of restoration. But

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action must be taken. We must spend time in prayer, worship and fasting if necessary, to learn what God would have us do. Then, as Shechaniah said to Ezra, get up, be of good courage and take action.

Sources:

Banks, M. (Ed.). (2020). Call in the New Testament. *Precepts for Living*, 23(Spring Quarter), 362-373. The Urban Ministries, Inc. Annual Commentary 2020-2021.
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Lesson for Next Week – April 18, 2021 – Study Guide 7

NEHEMIAH: THE CAPTIVE CUPBEARER REBUILDS A NATION

Bible Background ♦ NEHEMIAH 2:11-20; 13:1-22

Printed Text ♦ NEHEMIAH 2:11-20

Devotional Reading ♦ DANIEL 9:4-6, 15-19

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Daniel Intercedes for Jerusalem

(Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19)

TUESDAY

Nehemiah Orders Temple Cleansing and Restoration

(Nehemiah 13:4-9)

WEDNESDAY

Nehemiah Restores Ministries of Levites, Singers

(Nehemiah 13:10-14)

THURSDAY

Nehemiah Reforms Sabbath Observances and Practices

(Nehemiah 13:15-22)

FRIDAY

Nehemiah Sets Standards for Jewish Marriages

(Nehemiah 13:23-27)

SATURDAY

People Respond Actively to the Law

(Nehemiah 2:1-10)

SUNDAY

Nehemiah Inspires the People to Rebuild

(Nehemiah 2:11-20)