

**Ezra 9-10****Ezra's Prayer About Intermarriage**

**9** After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. **2** They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness."

**3** When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. **4** Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

**5** Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God **6** and prayed:

"I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. **7** From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

<sup>8</sup> “But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. <sup>9</sup> Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup> “But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands <sup>11</sup> you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.’

<sup>13</sup> “What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. <sup>14</sup> Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? <sup>15</sup> Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.”

## The People's Confession of Sin

**10** While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. <sup>2</sup> Then Shekaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. <sup>3</sup> Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. <sup>4</sup> Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.”

<sup>5</sup> So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath. <sup>6</sup> Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

<sup>7</sup> A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

<sup>9</sup> Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion

and because of the rain. <sup>10</sup> Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt. <sup>11</sup> Now honour the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.”

<sup>12</sup> The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: “You are right! We must do as you say. <sup>13</sup> But there are many people here and it is the rainy season; so we cannot stand outside. Besides, this matter cannot be taken care of in a day or two, because we have sinned greatly in this thing. <sup>14</sup> Let our officials act for the whole assembly. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us.” <sup>15</sup> Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah, supported by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite, opposed this.

<sup>16</sup> So the exiles did as was proposed. Ezra the priest selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to investigate the cases, <sup>17</sup> and by the first day of the first month they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women.

### **Those Guilty of Intermarriage**

<sup>18</sup> Among the descendants of the priests, the following had married foreign women:

From the descendants of Joshua son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah. <sup>19</sup> (They all gave their hands in pledge to put away their

wives, and for their guilt they each presented a ram from the flock as a guilt offering.)

Please have your **Bibles opened** to **Ezra chapter 9** – and we will be going through to **chapter 10**.

There's an **outline** for you to take **notes**. Let me **pray** first. Let's pray...

### Intro/Problem (Ezra 9:1-2)

If Ezra was written by Disney writers – it would have finished last week at chapter 8, where Ezra and the Jewish people returned from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. And faithfully brought all the silver and gold and temple articles to Jerusalem and re-established proper worship of God at the Temple. It's a classic Disney happy ending.

But the Bible is not like Disney

The Bible gives us '*real life*' and shows us '*warts and all*'

As we hit chapter 9

### **[Slide-Intro/Problem]**

Ezra stumbles across a **very serious problem!**

That has him **literally pulling his hair out!**

And remember he's only just returned to Jerusalem and seen the temple for the first time – he's on a high!

**BUT...**

Look at verses 1 and 2

Some leaders come to Ezra and say to him – the people of Israel have married foreign pagan wives from the surrounding nations/tribes with detestable practices and who worship false gods.

Why is this a **problem**?

### A few reasons

- 1<sup>st</sup> when the Israelites had first entered the Promised Land led by Joshua – God warned them, not to have anything to do with the surrounding nations/tribes – because these other nations/tribes – worshipped many different gods and idols – practiced ritual prostitution and child/human sacrifices to gain favours from their gods. God knew if they intermarried or mixed with these people – the Jewish worship of the one true God would be polluted
- 2<sup>nd</sup> – The Israelites hadn't obeyed this command over the centuries – which is why they ended up in Exile in Babylon in the first place
- 3<sup>rd</sup> – Now in Ezra's time they are repeating that same sin
- 4<sup>th</sup> – Intermarrying with these foreign wives is **not a RACIST or ETHNIC problem** – **it's a spiritual problem** – because eventually the Jewish pure worship of the one true God – would dilute and dilute over the next generations – and may even disappear altogether
- 5<sup>th</sup> – What made things worse is the leaders of the Jewish people led the way in this sin!

It's a disaster!

**We can learn from the rest of Ezra 9-10 about how to deal with sin in our lives.**

Let's be clear - SIN – is when we disobey and rebel against God's rules – and choose to go the world's way instead of God's way – or try to mix the world's way with God's way – and we **compromise**.

### **3 things we can learn...**

1<sup>st</sup> thing we can learn from Ezra about dealing with sin – **We must grieve and repent of our sin**

**[Slide-Grieve/Repent]**

#### We must grieve and repent of our sin (Ezra 9:3-5)

When Ezra heard about this sin

He was devastated

Verse 3 – as a sign of his grief – Ezra tore his tunic and cloak – pulled his hair out from his head and beard

**[this might be where we get the expression 'pulling my hair out']**

Ezra is crushed – and he sits down appalled (verse 3)

He's even joined by others who tremble at the words of God (verse 4). What that means is there were many others like Ezra – who took God's Word seriously – and were deeply moved – even afraid – when they heard that people had disobeyed God in this way – and they too grieved this sin – and felt the weight of this sin – on the whole community

Ezra stayed in this grieved state – all day – until the evening sacrifice – verse 5 – and then he threw himself at the mercy of God – he fell on his knees with his hands spread out to the Lord his God.

### Application:

For us there's a few lessons here...

- a. **1<sup>st</sup> - We must take sin seriously** – we should not ignore our sin – or excuse our sin. When we realise we have sinned – whether personally or as a church – we should respond with grief and sorrow – and not just shrug it off – saying 'oh well never mind'
- b. **2<sup>nd</sup> - We must be honest with God** – Ezra did not hide this sin. He brought it before God. We should come to God in prayer – admitting our wrong and seeking His mercy
- c. **3<sup>rd</sup> - We must turn back to God and be willing to change**. It's not just a matter of feeling sorry for our sin, there must be a turning away from that sin (that's what repentance is – doing a U-Turn) and committing to follow God's way
- d. **4<sup>th</sup> - Surround ourselves with others who take God's Word seriously** – and help each other to live faithfully

### Challenge

Is there a sin we are hiding from God and from the people in our life. It might not even be our sin but we're keeping silent about it. Don't let that sin fester. Don't let that sin continue. Today is the day – to grieve and repent of that sin!

(pause)



2<sup>nd</sup> thing we can learn from Ezra about dealing with sin is – **We must sincerely confess our sin**

**[Slide-confess]**

**We must sincerely confess our sin (Ezra 9:6-15)**

In verses 6 to 15 – Ezra makes **a sincere confession**.

The first thing to notice about Ezra's prayer of confession is he throws himself in there – He uses "**we**" and "**our**" – this is a **corporate sin – the whole community is affected**

Ezra had NOT married a foreign pagan wife himself – but he acknowledged that there had been a failure in the leadership – some of the leaders had even married foreign pagan wives too.

Ezra's confession does not make any excuses – like "we didn't know it would be a problem" or "we weren't thinking" or "the women enticed us"

Instead - verse 6 – Ezra says ***"I am too ashamed and disgraced to even lift up my face to God"***

And he says ***"our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached the heavens"***

**In other words – the people are drowning in this sin!**

Ezra also acknowledges that this sin – is not a new one – verse 7 – he realizes this is the exact sin that got their ancestors exiled

Ezra also acknowledges in verses 8 and 9 – that God has been gracious enough to keep a remnant of His people and allow them to come back to the Temple and

reestablish worship. God didn't have to do that – God could have wiped them all out for this sin or even left them in Exile to become a forgotten people.

But God showed them grace and mercy...

Ezra's prayer of confession goes on to say in verses 10 to 12

There's very little he can offer as an explanation as to why the people intermarried with foreign/pagan women – because God had told the people of Israel through prophets over the centuries – not to have anything to do with these people surrounding the promised land because their detestable practices would fill God's people with impurity. Ezra's realizes the people have no excuse for doing this. We can only imagine how Ezra is feeling here.

Ezra also realizes in verses 13 to 15 – that God has always been merciful to His people – verse 13 “*you have punished us less than our sins deserve*”

And that God could have been “*angry enough with them to destroy them, leaving them no remnant or survivor*” – verse 14

And because of the people's great sin – Ezra admits – verse 15 “*here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence*”

Wow!

What a confession Ezra makes!

Application:

For us there's a few lessons here...

**1<sup>st</sup> - We must humble ourselves before God.** Ezra bowed down in shame. We too should come to God with humility – even getting down on our knees - admitting our guilt instead of defending ourselves and making excuses.

**2<sup>nd</sup> – We must acknowledge the seriousness of our sin.** We shouldn't downplay sin – it offends our Holy God - it damages trust - it damages lives – and it is a poor example and witness to others – and could even prevent others from following Jesus

**3<sup>rd</sup> – We can remember God's mercy.** Even while confessing, Ezra remembered God's grace and mercy. When we confess, we can do so with hope, knowing God is merciful and forgiving.

**4<sup>th</sup> – Don't repeat the same sin!** Ezra was heartbroken that the people had repeated old sins. True confession means we want to break the cycle and not return to the same sin over and over.

### Challenge:

Let's take time this week to talk honestly to God about our sin. Let's ask God for His forgiveness and for His help to change.

**1 John 1:9 says – *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.***

(pause)

**3<sup>rd</sup> thing we can learn - from Ezra about dealing with sin is – **We must make things right, even if it costs us****

[Slide-make it right]

We must make things right even if it costs us (Ezra 10:1-44)

It's right and proper – to grieve and repent of our sin.

It's right and proper – to sincerely confess our sin

But it's also right and proper – to make things right again – to fix the wrong we've caused.

As we hit chapter 10 – we see how Ezra and the people make things right – even if it is costly to some folk!

In verse 1 we have a picture of Ezra praying, confessing, weeping and throwing himself before the Lord at the House of the Lord (Temple) – and he is joined with a whole heap of people weeping with him.

Now remember – last week I said that I was convicted of being serious about prayer – and how Ezra prayed and fasted.

And I said – last week - God brings about His will - through our prayers.

Look at verse 2 – **through the Holy Spirit** – **Ezra's prayers are answered**

A man named Shekaniah who hadn't intermarried foreign/pagan wives but his father Jehiel had (verses 21, 26) and his relative Elam (verse 26) had – came to Ezra with a way to put things right in verses 2 to 4; Shekeniah said – Israel has been unfaithful – but there is still hope – and that they should make a covenant with God to send away the foreign pagan wives – and that the people will support Ezra in this matter.

Ezra agreed with Shekaniah's proposal

And like a good Presbyterian Jew – Ezra followed a clear process in setting things right!

- Verse 5 – Ezra put the leadership under oath to make things right
- Verse 6 – Ezra continued to fast, pray and grieve the unfaithfulness of the people
- Verses 7&8 – A proclamation was issued for everyone to assemble in Jerusalem – and if they didn't show up – they would lose their property
- Verses 9-11 – Ezra issued an edict for the Jews to separate from the foreign pagan wives
- Verses 12 to 15 – The whole assembly agreed – but asked for time to put this matter right because the matter would take a while to deal with and because it was the rainy season
- Verse 16 – **each family was investigated case by case**. Given the small number of families listed that actually sent wives away – we can deduce that as each case was investigated – if the foreign wife was willing to forsake their foreign gods/idols and worship the one true God of Israel only – then they would not be sent away!

Verse 17 – this matter took about two months to deal with

The rest of the chapter is a list of those who married foreign wives that were sent away.

Application:

For us there's a few lessons

### **1<sup>st</sup> -True repentance includes action**

It's not enough to feel sorry — we must take real steps to make things right, even when it's painful or costly.

For example – if I've stolen money – it's not just a matter of saying sorry – I need to return the money I stole

If I've said some untrue and hurtful things about someone – I need to go to that person and apologise and reconcile and retract those comments. If my comments were made in public – then the apology should also be made in public!

If I've lied – it's not enough to admit I've lied. I need to choose to tell the truth from now on...

### **2<sup>nd</sup> – Don't compromise with the world**

Israel compromised by ignoring God's commands about marriage. Today, we must guard against mixing God's way with the world's values. In our relationships our behaviour must not be influenced by non-believers. The time we invest in indulging ourselves must not take us away from worshipping and serving God. Our relationship with God and His Son Jesus must be our first priority – not our last resort

### 3<sup>rd</sup> – Marriage matters to God

Marriage mattered in the Old Testament.

And it matters in the New Testament and it matters today.

In the Old Testament – the people were **under the Law**.

In the New Testament – **we are under grace**.

As Christians we are called to marry a fellow Christian and not to be unevenly yoked together (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

Why?

Because a Christian's priority is the Lord Jesus – where as a non-Christian's priority is not the Lord Jesus. So at some point – sooner or later – the Christian is going to be asked to compromise. Their non-believing spouse will inevitably arrange something that clashes with their believing spouse serving the Lord – and gradually the Christian spouse will get dragged away from Jesus being their priority!

Unlike the mixed marriages in Ezra in the Old Testament – which were a vastly different and tragic context. Christians in mixed marriages in the New Testament – are **NOT commanded to divorce** - but to **remain in the marriage** – because they could well lead their spouse to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:12-16) – that's grace!

Marriage is also important to God – because marriage points to the marriage between Jesus (the bridegroom) and the Church (His bride) – and it's **a picture of the sacrificial love that is required in a marriage** and that sacrificial love is

perfectly demonstrated by Jesus' sacrificial love for His church on the Cross (a to-die-for love!)

#### 4<sup>th</sup> – Sin has lasting consequences

Even though the Jews repented, the impact of their choices affected families and communities. Likewise any marriage breakup today impacts the parents, the children, grandparents, extended family and friends.

God forgives, but the effects and consequences of sin can remain — that's why it's so important to make godly choices in the first place.

#### Challenge:

Is there something we need to put right with God or put right with others? Let's do it this week. Even if it costs us! Let's not put it off any longer!

(pause)

#### Conclusion (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Just one final thought to finish up then...

Whether we are talking about intermarriage with foreign pagan wives (as in Ezra's time) or ANY other sin we commit – the principle that applies is that – as Christians we need to ask ourselves – “***what fellowship can light have with darkness***” (1 Cor 6:14). We need to be alert to situations that might put us in a position of compromise or that might lead us in the opposite direction to following Jesus!

Let me finish with this advice from the writer of Hebrews – chapter 12 – verses 1 &



**[Slide-Hebrews 12:1-2]**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, **let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.** And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus,** the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Let's pray...

*Heavenly Father, help us to realize you are holy and we are not holy.*

*Help us to take sin in our lives seriously.*

*Help us to grieve and repent of our sins*

*Help us to sincerely confess our sins*

*And help us to make things right even if it costs us.*

*And help us to throw off everything that hinders us from being Christ like.*

*And to throw off any sin that entangles us*

*Help us to fix our eyes completely on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

*In His precious name, we pray. Amen.*