

Ezra 09 - Ezra's Ministry in Judah; God's People Fail to Separate from Surrounding Nations

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(2) Ezra leads reformation among the people (Ezra 9:1—10:44)

In contrast with the high point of God's blessing on the people at the end of the previous section (8:36), this section opens with a statement about the severe sin into which the people of the post-exilic community had fallen. The reason the people were back in the land was so that they would be able to worship God according to the Law. However, when the people returned to the land, they still had a tendency to wander away from the words of God that had been written by Moses.

When Ezra arrived in Judah he found that the people who had been living there for some time had not kept themselves separate from the peoples of the land (Gentiles), but had begun to intermarry with them. Not only was intermarriage commonplace, but the spiritual and political leaders in Judah were the worst offenders! Deeply shaken, Ezra tore his clothing and his hair—a sign of intense grief and/or anger—and slumped down before the temple. At evening he rose, then fell on his knees and prayed. Ezra's prayer was a prayer of confession. And as he wept aloud, a large crowd gathered. They too began to weep bitterly! The Spirit of God was using the anguish of Ezra to touch the hearts of His people. Revival was about to break out!

Ezra 9

(A) Sins of Jewish intermarriage with the pagans reported to Ezra (9:1-4)

(a) Report (9:1-2)

1 Now when these things had been completed, **the officials approached me**, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites **have not separated themselves** from the peoples of the lands, as to their abominations, *those* of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, *those* of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.

1 After these things occurred, certain officials approached me and said "The people of Israel, the priests, and the descendants of Levi have not separated themselves from the people of the lands or from the detestable behavior of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites,

1 Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

- "...the officials approached me" - suggests that these were men who had previously returned to the land under Zerubbabel and had established themselves as leaders and had looked into the problem. Ezra's return may have pricked their consciences as they reflected on the Law of God.

— Ezra's return had a profound effect on the people of Israel. The man who was devoted to the accurate teaching of the Law became the focal point of a major reform. This occurred less than five months after his arrival (Cf. 7:9 with 10:9).

— They realized that something had to be done about the situation if the nation was to enjoy fellowship with the Lord. Outward sacrifice was fine, but only if it was accompanied by an inward conformity to the Word of God (Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

- "...have not separated themselves" - the Jews who had arrived in Israel before Ezra began to intermarry with Gentiles in the surrounding regions. The Jewish leaders also reported to Ezra that some Israelites had been involved with their pagan neighbors' detestable practices (Cf. v11,14).

— Intermarriage with the surrounding Canaanites was strictly forbidden in the Mosaic Law (Ex 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-5; Cf. Lev 18:3). It had also resulted in tragic consequences in Israel's prior history (Cf. 1 Kings 11:1-8).

— This was not because of racial difference, for the peoples of the surrounding areas were of the same Semitic race. The reason was strictly religious. If God's people married outside Israel they would be tempted (as was Solomon; 1 Kings 11:3-5) to get caught up in pagan idolatrous worship.

— They were also forsaking Jewish identity that, if continued, in a few generations there would cease to be any distinctive Jewish community in the Promised Land

— Intermarrying with people who did not worship Yahweh was symptomatic of the way the people forsook other aspects of God's Law. If they would break this aspect of the Law in the most intimate of human relationships then they would also break the Law in other less intimate human relationships.

In the beginning 'God divided the light from the darkness,' and it has been the business of the devil ever since to seek to link the twain together. [Ironsides]

2 For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with **the peoples of the lands**; indeed, the hands of **the officials and the leaders have taken the lead** in this unfaithfulness."

2 For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

2 because they and their sons have married foreign women. As a result, the holy people have mingled themselves among the nations of these lands. As a matter of fact, the senior officials and the rulers have been foremost in this sin."

2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

- "...the peoples of the lands" - the peoples listed in v1 were many of the same God had warned about centuries before (Deut 7:1), as well as the surrounding nations of Ammon, Moab, and Egypt

— Thus, the actions described in Ezra 10 were not directed against Israelite returnees and "the peoples of the land," but rather against Israel's old wilderness and conquest enemies, often called the Canaanites.

- "...the officials and the leaders have taken the lead" - they were the leaders, but were leading in the wrong direction, away from God. Those who would profit most from worldly alliances led the nation in going that direction.

(b) Ezra's response (9:3-4)

3 When I **heard about this matter**, I tore my garment and my robe, and **pulled out some of the hair** from my head and my beard, and sat down **appalled**.

3 When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.

3 When I heard this, I tore both my garment and robe, plucked hair from both my head and my beard, and collapsed in shock!

3 And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

- "...heard about this matter" - Ezra had just finished a grueling and dangerous four-month, 900 mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. Perhaps he over-romanticized the spiritual state of the prior returnees and expected to find something completely different than the culture of compromise that he found.

- "...pulled out some of the hair" - an expression of extreme grief, violent wrath, or intense moral indignation (Cf. Is 50:6). Ezra's response was typical of the response of godly people in the OT when they found out about sin.

— Tearing his tunic and cloak was a sign of mourning (Cf. Num 14:6; Joshua 7:6; Esther 4:1; Job 1:20), and pulling hair from his head and beard was a sign of unusual grief or of intense anger (Is 22:12)

— Ezra knew that if the people do not care to preserve their distinctiveness, then his efforts to get them to follow the Torah would be fruitless

- "...appalled" - stupefied; literally "to make pale." Certainly one of the reasons for his mourning was that Ezra knew that it was these same sins of idolatry and compromise that caused Israel's prior exiles. He was surely puzzled how the people could endanger themselves in this way again.

— Both Ezra and Nehemiah were confronted with the sin of pagan intermarriage. Nehemiah plucked out the hair of the guilty (Cf. Neh 13:25), while Ezra responded by plucking out his own hair.

A man's attitude toward God's Word is one of the ultimate criteria of his spirituality.
[Whitcomb]

4 Then everyone who was **frightened by the words of the God of Israel** on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and **I sat appalled** until the evening offering.

4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered together as a group because of the sin committed by those who had been led astray. As for me, I

remained seated, in shock, until the evening sacrifice.

4 Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

- "...frightened by the words of the God of Israel" - there were at least some in the community of Israel who were also horrified at the sin of intermarriage and idolatry — Notice that those who respected "the words of the God of Israel" (God's Word) were the ones who gathered together with Ezra

- "...I sat appalled" - partly for grief and frustration at the sin, and partly for fear of coming judgment

(B) Ezra confesses the exiles' sins (9:5-15)

(a) Ezra's remorse (9:5-7)

5 But at the evening offering I stood up from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I **bowed down on my knees and spread out my hands** to the LORD my God;

5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

5 At the time of the evening sacrifice, I arose from my discouragement. Still in my torn garment and robe, I fell to my knees with my hands outstretched to the LORD my God,

5 And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,

- The time for mourning and anger was over...now Ezra knew it was time to pray

- The evening sacrifice was about 3pm (between 2:30-3:30pm)

- "...bowed down on my knees and spread out my hands" - Ezra's physical position showed that he was throwing himself on the mercy of God. Israel had departed from God's will, and Ezra confessed this as sin (v6,7,10).

— Ezra knew that the nation was guilty (v6-7; Cf. v13,15) so he assumed a position of begging before the Lord. There was no excuse for the people's actions. Ezra's prayer was made at the temple with weeping (10:1).

— Ezra was identifying with the body of believers, even though he had not personally participated in their sin (Cf. Dan 9:4-19)

— "bowed down in my knees" - Ezra was one of many in the Bible who prayed on their knees:

- Solomon prayed on his knees (1 Kings 8:54)
- The Psalmist called us to kneel before God (Ps 95:6)
- Daniel prayed on his knees (Dan 6:10)

- People presented themselves to Jesus in a kneeling posture (Matt 17:14; 20:20; Mark 1:40)
- Stephen prayed on his knees (Acts 7:60)
- Peter prayed on his knees (Acts 9:40)
- Paul prayed on his knees (Acts 20:36; Eph 3:14)
- Some early Christians prayed on their knees (Acts 21:5)
- Most importantly, Jesus prayed on His knees (Luke 22:41)

— The Bible gives us enough examples of prayer *not* on the knees to show us that it isn't required, but also has enough examples of prayer *on* the knees to show us that it is good.

— "spread out my hands" - the most common posture of prayer in the OT. Today we bow our heads, fold our hands, and close our eyes, but the OT tradition was to spread out the hands toward heaven in a gesture of surrender, openness, and ready reception.

6 and I said, "My God, I am ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God, for **our wrongful deeds** have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

6 and said, "My God, I am too ashamed and hurt to turn to you, because we're in our iniquities over our heads. Furthermore, my God, our sins have grown as high as the heavens.

6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.

- On his knees, with hands lifted high, Ezra's head was face down in shame and humiliation before the Lord

- "...our wrongful deeds" - not their wrongful deeds; Ezra had just arrived in this community and he had not shared in any of the sins they were committing. Yet he knew because they were all bound together in the same covenant with God, *their* sins were in fact *his* sins.

7 Since the days of our fathers to this day **we have been in great guilt**, and because of our wrongful deeds we, our kings, *and* our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to open shame, as *it is* this day.

7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings *and* our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as *it is* this day.

7 We have lived in great sin from the days of our ancestors even until today, and because of those iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered over to foreign kings, for execution, for captivity, for plunder, and for humiliation, as is the case today.

7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

- "...we *have been* in great guilt" - Ezra recognized and confessed the sinful past of Israel

- "...handed over to the kings of the lands" - he recognized that Israel's exiles were a righteous work of God against His sinful people

— The Captivity was to be a method of purifying the people and re-establishing a close relationship between them and God. Apparently the exile had not accomplished its purpose because of the people's tendency to stray from their covenantal obligations.

(b) Ezra recalls God's previous grace to Israel (9:8-9)

8 But now **for a brief moment grace has been *shown*** from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to **give us a peg in His holy place**, so that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

8 But now for a brief moment grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

8 Though now, for a moment, grace has been shown from the LORD our God, leaving a few survivors to escape, and providing us a secure hold in his Holy Place, so that our God might enlighten us and give us relief from our servitude.

8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

- "...for a brief moment grace has been *shown*" - Ezra now reflected on God's grace in bringing back a remnant from exile and allowing them to live in the Promised Land again

- "...give us a peg in His holy place" - the idea is that Israel was once again in a safe position, standing in God's favor and in His temple

— In those days, houses did not have cabinets and drawers used for storage. Belongings were hung on pegs fastened to the walls. If something was on its peg, it was safe and secure, stored properly and ready for use at the appropriate time.

— Just a few days prior to Ezra's prayer here, he had seen the temple for the first time. He was impressed that God had given His people "a peg in His holy place" once again.

9 For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not abandoned us, but has extended favor to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to erect the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to **give us a wall** in Judah and Jerusalem.

9 For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

9 Even though we are slaves, our God has not abandoned us in our slavery. Instead, he has extended gracious love to us in the presence of the kings of Persia, to grant us revival, to set up the Temple of our God, to repair its damage, and to give us a protective wall for Judah and Jerusalem.

9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

- Ezra acknowledged the grace of God in allowing the people to return to the land, with standing and security in His temple. All that God had done, in the face of great sin and disobedience, made him appreciate how good God had been to His people, and how dangerous it was for them to sin and compromise in response to His goodness.

— He reminded God and himself that it was the Lord's graciousness that allowed the kings of Persia to grant the Jews freedom to return to the land of promise to rebuild the temple. But now they were back in bondage—bondage to sin.

- "...give us a wall" - this is not an allusion to the wall that was repaired in Nehemiah's day. Most scholars agree that the reference to a wall here is not to be taken literally, but rather as protection and security.

(c) Confession of Israel's specific sin of intermarriage with the Canaanites
(9:10-14)

10 "And now, our God, **what shall we say after this?** For we have abandoned Your commandments,

10 "Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments,

10 Now, our God, what can we say besides this? Because we have abandoned your commandments

10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,

- "...what shall we say after this?" - Ezra offered no excuses or even an explanation. The conduct of Israel was indefensible and in direct disobedience to what God had commanded by His servants the prophets.

— No explanation was given for the leaders' disobedience. They had broken God's commands to remain pure before Him and to separate from the corruption and detestable practices (Cf. v1,14) in the land.

— They had directly disobeyed the clear Word of God. Foreign marriages contaminated Israel, fostered the foreigners' prosperity, weakened Israel spiritually, and decreased her opportunity to enjoy the land's crops.

11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end, *and* with their impurity.

11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end *and* with their impurity.

11 that you gave in the writings of your servants, the prophets: 'The land you are entering to possess is a morally unclean land due to the moral uncleanness of the nations of the lands—along with their abominations—that has filled it from one end to the other with their impurities.

11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.

12 So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, so that you may be strong and may eat the good *things* of the land, and leave *it* as an inheritance to your sons forever.'

12 So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good *things* of the land and leave *it* as an inheritance to your sons forever.'

12 So, therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor marry their daughters to your sons, and under no circumstances are you to seek their well-being or their wealth, so that you may remain strong, enjoying the best things the land has to give, and so that you may establish an inheritance for your children forever.'

12 Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.

- Verses 11-12 summarize the teaching of the former prophets

13 And after everything that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have spared *us by inflicting less than our wrongdoing deserves*, and have given us *such* an escaped remnant as this,

13 After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited *us* less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us an escaped remnant as this,

13 "After all that has happened to us because of our evil behavior, and because of our great sin—considering that you our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve⁸ and have given us this deliverance—

13 And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this;

- "...less than our wrongdoing *deserves*" - as severe as the Babylonian exile was, along with the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Ezra recognized that it was less than the people of God deserved

— As he considered their present disobedience, he understood that it was a way of despising the great mercy God had shown them in the past, and meant they deserved a complete and final judgment

14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there would be no remnant nor any who would escape?

14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?

14 should we violate your commandments by intermarrying with the nations who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you had consumed us, with not even a remnant surviving⁹ to escape?

14 Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?

- The conclusion Ezra reached was that God would be totally just in destroying them in His anger so that no remnant would be left. They deserved even greater punishment than God was giving them (Cf. v6).

— In a nutshell, Ezra was describing the position of all mankind before God. As people disobey the Word of God they stand under His wrath in their guilt.

(d) Ezra acknowledges God's right to covenant judgment (9:15)

15 LORD **God of Israel, You are righteous**, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as *it is* this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

15 O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as *it is* this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

15 LORD God of Israel, you are just: As a result, we remain here today delivered. Look at us! Because of our sin, we cannot stand in your presence as a result of everything that has happened."

15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

- "...God of Israel" - Ezra appealed to the Lord as the "God of Israel" even though His people had been unfaithful to Him. Ezra still hoped for covenant mercies from Him because He was their God.

- "...You are righteous" - Ezra also appealed to God's righteousness because He left a remnant in fulfillment of His prior promises (Cf. 2 Chr 30:6; Is 10:20-22)

- Ezra's prayer included no specific request; he simply threw himself on God's mercy. He did not ask God for His people to escape from the consequences of their evil conduct, but rather to escape from the evil conduct itself.

— By this he concluded his prayer in the same way he began. He acknowledged that no one in the entire community was worthy to stand before the righteous God.

— In his prayer Ezra affirmed several attributes of God: grace (v8), kindness (v9), anger (v14), and righteousness (v15). Ezra was asking God to be merciful on the basis of His loyal love for the nation.

This is one of the great prayers that God recorded in the OT (Cf. 2 Chr 6; Neh 9; Dan 9). It illustrates how a faithful individual should respond to the sins of the people among whom they live. Christians also need to realize that they are part of a group, not just individuals. As believers, we belong to the whole body of Christ, and most Christians also belong to a local church. As part of those groups, we participate in the actions of the groups, and the consequences of the group's actions, even though we may not personally approve of those actions. It is appropriate, therefore, for the leaders of God's people to confess the sins of the groups to which they belong.