

October 7

Ezra 9-10

Today we read chapters 9 and 10, the last two chapters of the Book of Ezra. When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, the very first thing he did was to worship by offering sacrifices to the Lord. Then, recognizing the importance of the newcomer among them, the leaders of the people came to see Ezra. They brought him a big problem. "The people of Israel" they said, "including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples (with their detestable practices) ... They have taken some of their daughters as wives."

Now, the very first thing to which I want to call your attention is the immediacy and the extreme nature of Ezra's reaction to this issue. I cannot believe that the marital status of the leaders and people of Israel was the only problem facing the Jerusalemites. It is, however, significant for us to notice that they obviously thought it was the biggest problem they were facing. It certainly is the first problem they brought to Ezra, and just as obviously Ezra agreed with them. As soon as he hears of it, he tears his tunic, pulls hair from his head and beard (ouch!) and sits for the rest of the day "appalled."

There is a moving prayer of repentance as Ezra, like the great prophets before him, takes upon himself the guilt of the people and begs for the forgiveness of God. Also please note that Ezra's prayer produces a movement of repentance among the people.

A very radical solution is pursued. The Jews commit themselves to put away their foreign wives and their children in an attempt to purge the great evil from their land. Ezra fasts and prays until it is clear that the remedy will be carried out.

We need to be very clear about what is going on here. God is not a racist. He does not hate all people who are not Jews. In fact, quite to the contrary, He told Abraham that it was His intention to bless all the nations of the earth. All through the prophetic books we have been reading, there is a consistent theme that emphasizes the invitation to all nations to join in the worship of the One true God at Jerusalem. Any "stranger" was welcome in Israel if their intention was to worship Israel's God and Gentile women like Rahab and Ruth were not only welcome, they were included by God in the line of Messiah. The problem here in Ezra is not that the Jews had Gentile wives but they had married women who had not converted to the worship of Jehovah and who therefore would teach their children to be idolaters and lead the next generation of Israelites right back into the idolatry that had led to their judgment just one generation before. God is not a racist and neither must His people be -- there is no room for that at all in scripture. But God is not a pluralist when it comes to worship and religion. He does not tolerate the worship of other gods and we, as His people, cannot compromise on this issue especially when it comes to the subject of marriage.

The remedy employed -- that of putting away the unbelieving spouses was extreme. It was harsh and it does not seem to me even to be very honorable. Sometimes, when we sin we end up with no good alternatives and end up by having to choose the "least bad" solution. That is what we have here, stay with the pagan wives and honor your marriage vows and once again sacrifice the moral purity of the entire nation and invite God's judgment to fall a second time on Israel and Jerusalem, or depart from the wife & leave the wrong life style that entailed. In spite of the harshness of their decision, I believe they chose the least bad solution -- but it wasn't a "good" one. Sometimes sin leaves us without any choices that we can feel good or proud about. Next time you are tempted to consciously disobey the word of God, remember that and think very hard before you put yourself into an "impossible" situation.

I know that you took special note of the prayer that Ezra prayed. It is a model of prayer and there is much for us to learn from it. The most prominent feature of this prayer we have encountered before. We might call it the "incarnational factor." Ezra, who is absolutely innocent in the area of sin that is being addressed, does not ask God to forgive "them," he prays that God will forgive "us." He represents Israel as one of them by completely identifying with them in their sin. In the great tradition of biblical intercessors like Moses, Jeremiah and Jesus Himself, Ezra assumes the sin of the people for whom he prays. That is a rather painful but very powerful strategy of intercessory prayer.

The next thing I want to point out to you is the very last verse of Ezra's prayer: "O, Lord 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." As you go to prayer, that is a perfect description of your position before God. And that, of course, is why Jesus Christ was slain for us. That is why we come to God through Christ on the basis of His sacrifice. "By a new and living way" we have access to God through Christ's death on the cross.

The first verse of chapter 10 is equally important. "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." That is how revival begins. It starts with prayer and with brokenness about sin. Often on the part of just one or only a few and then others are convicted and they too begin to pray out of brokenness, because of sin. That is the way real movements of God always begin. Someone is brokenhearted about sin and begins to pray. Ezra's demonstrated fervency in prayer and fasting and persistence (he did not stop praying when the people said they would obey God -- he kept praying and fasting until they actually did what they said they would do.)

Next, please note that when it was time to act Ezra put the priests, the Levites and then the whole nation under oath to act to resolve the problem -- first the priests and Levites, then the rest of the nation. That is the proper way to institute change in society or in a church or in a family. To be effective, it has to start with the leaders. Then more people will follow. If you are a leader and you want the people to do anything, you have to model it for them. You do it first, show them, don't just tell them.

One last thing about chapter 10: It includes, recorded for all of posterity, the names of the men who were guilty of marrying unbelieving women. Ezra actually includes their names in the Bible! That is yet another indication both of how serious this sin was, and of how determined Ezra was that the children of Israel would learn from the mistakes of the past!

We have now finished the Book of Ezra. I think I will remember the expression "The good hand of God was on him." It is truly wonderful to contemplate the providential dealings of God with His people.

I will also remember that Satan always opposes the work of God. He will attempt, if he can, to raise up external opposition from the enemies of God. But when that fails he will work to get the people of God to weaken themselves internally by compromise (like intermarriage).

That was the tactic when the Jews returned from exile -- and guess what? His game plan is still the same today!! Remember, the New Testament says, these things are written for our "instruction."