

Responding to Sin and Guilt: Repentance

Ezra 10

Today we conclude our study of restoration from the book of Ezra. We hope that it's been helpful and refreshing for you.

In Ezra 9 we learned that some of the men who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon had married wives from among "the peoples of the land." God has specifically forbidden such intermarriage (see Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7). God warned them that if they did so, their hearts would be turned away from Him to serve other gods. They would no longer be an example of the type of life that God offers to those who love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They would experience "the worst of both worlds": the futility of worshiping false gods **and** the harsh discipline from the one, true living God.

Ezra's response was to tear his clothes and to pull hair out of his head and beard. This response reflected that the people's sin threatened everything that God wanted to restore by bringing them back to the land and allowing them to rebuild the temple. They couldn't live out their covenant with God (the old covenant, the Law) if they intermarried with people who worshiped and served other gods. In Ezra 9 Ezra prays an impassioned prayer of confession.

This morning we are going to see in Ezra 10 how the people responded in repentance. Confession of sin is a prelude to repentance. Confession involves articulating what is wrong in our lives; repentance involves taking a different path/course. The people's repentance in Ezra 10 serves as an example for us.

My perception (and my experience) is that we often stop after confession and don't actually go on to repentance. We honestly tell God how broken we are over our sin; we come clean and experience a fresh cleansing from God. We may even tell God, "I'm through with that sin. I will never do it again. I am completely Yours from this moment forward." That conviction and desire is good, but it's not enough. It's like getting up from a great big Thanksgiving dinner and say, "I'm not eating again for a week." You may honestly think that, but the next day you'll think differently. As you know, it's possible to confess your sin in a heartfelt way one day and lose your resolve the next day.

We need a clear, decisive plan that will allow us to live differently even when we don't feel like it. We actually need to repent if we want to avoid returning to the same patterns of sin over and over again. The example of repentance we see in Ezra 10 gives us the contours of such repentance. After we consider the repentance illustrated in Ezra's day, we'll talk about principles of repentance in our lives in our day.

Repentance in Ezra's Day (Ezra 10:1–17)

Verses 1-4 describe how the people responded to Ezra's prayer of confession:

1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.

Entire families gathered around Ezra as he confessed the people's sins and wept and threw himself to the ground. Eventually this gathering of people began weeping also. Verse 2 tells us that one of those gathered, Shecaniah, spoke on behalf of the people.

2 Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

We don't really know much about Shecaniah (there were five or six men with that name in Ezra/Nehemiah). We learn later in the chapter (see v. 26) that several members of his family were guilty of marrying foreign wives. We see here in verse 2 that Shecaniah understood that in spite of their sin "there is hope for Israel." He understood that God is very eager to forgive His people when they confess their sins and repent.

In verses 3 he proposes that they renew their covenant with God in a very radical way.

3 "So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

He proposes that all who had married women from among the peoples of the land divorce their wives and send them away, along with any children that had been born to them. This offends our sensibilities in a number of different ways, doesn't it? A God who "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16) couldn't possibly be in favor of this proposal, right? Plus a lot of "innocent" people would suffer untold hardship if this proposal was accepted. Moms and their children would be put out of the community to fend for themselves. Would they be accepted and cared for if they returned to their peoples and their families of origin? Even the men who remained in Israel would be separated from their families; no doubt at least some of them loved their wives and children.

On a number of different levels this proposal seems unreasonable and harsh. But since the law had forbidden intermarrying with the peoples of the land, this was what repentance looked like. The Jews were a small minority in a hostile land. If they didn't maintain their exclusive devotion to God, every gain God had given them would be lost. What's the point of being in covenant with the God of the universe if you're going to live like everybody else? There is no denying that this course of action would require great sacrifice, a period of grieving, and perseverance.

In verse 4 Shecaniah urges Ezra to take decisive action.

4 "Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act."

This endorsement empowered Ezra to act. He had respect and authority as a scribe. But commentators suggest that since he was sent back to Jerusalem by the Persian king, he was being careful not to impose a judgment on the people too quickly. But Shecaniah's endorsement gave him the green light.

5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.

The rest of the chapter describes how they carried out Shecaniah's proposal. For time's sake I'll give a summary of what happened. While Ezra continued to fast and mourn over the unfaithfulness of the people, representatives went throughout the city of Jerusalem and the region of Judah saying that everyone should assemble in Jerusalem within three days. In the dead of winter (the 9th month) the people assembled in the courtyard in front of the temple. Ezra adds that they they were trembling "because of this matter" (they felt the weight of their sin) and they were trembling "because of. . .the heavy rain." Their trembling was both emotional and physical.

Notice what Ezra commands in verses 10 and 11:

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. 11 "Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

Verse 12 records the people's response to this command.

12 Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do."

They fully accepted what Ezra said; they agreed that what he had said was "right." Interestingly, the following verses record an appeal that the people made for a very deliberate, fair process in carrying out this command. In light of the fact that it was the rainy season and in light of the fact that so many of them had sinned, they asked that their leaders be allowed to hold court in each city. Presumably the leaders would know the people and their situations and would judge fairly. When you think about it, some situations might be rather complex.

This plan, once approved by Ezra, took about two-and-a-half months to complete. In verses 18-44 we have a list of 110 cases involving those who had "married foreign wives." It is likely that other cases were heard in which people were found to be innocent. Whatever the case, the fact that only 110 cases took two and a half months suggests that they took great care to learn the facts and make fair determinations. The book of Ezra ends with the ominous statement (verse 44):

44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

Ezra ends by recording that the repentance of the people was commensurate with the sin they had committed. This repentance meant that the nation was back on track to experience the restoration God wanted to provide.

In a few minutes we are going to talk about the implications of Ezra 10 for us - how our repentance needs to reflect the depth and seriousness of our sin.

Note. But first I'd like to address a question that might have arisen in your mind last week and/or this week. The issue is whether or not there is anything analogous in our day to the Jews intermarrying with the peoples of the land. As we mentioned last week, the prohibition had nothing to do with race or ethnicity; it had to do with purity of devotion to God.

What about a follower of Christ who is married to someone outside the faith (whether they have a faith different than Christianity or no faith at all)? First, we encourage believers to marry only other believers. Since marriage is a spiritual union and since your spouse will probably affect you (for good or for evil) more than anybody else in your life, it only make sense that you marry someone with the same devotion to Jesus.

If for some reason you find that you're already married to someone who doesn't share your faith, Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7 applies. In Paul's day (as in ours) it is common for only the husband or the wife in a marriage to come to faith in Christ. As some of you know firsthand, when that happens there is often great conflict and strife. Paul's instruction is for the believing husband or wife to stay with the unbelieving wife or husband (while acknowledging that the other person might not stay).

In contrast with Israel being a distinct nation in the old covenant, the church is scattered in and among people without Christ. If you are married to someone who doesn't yet believe, your family becomes the primary place where you demonstrate the love of God. So it's a very different situation than what we've seen in Ezra 9 and 10.

Principles of Repentance: What are the implications of Ezra 10 for our repentance?

First, **Repentance flows from confession of sin.** This is an obvious point, but one that needs to be emphasized. As we talked about last week, our confession of sin to God (and possibly to others - see James 5:16) sets up our repentance. If our confession of sin is vague, our repentance will be weak. If our confession of sin is specific (based on specific Scriptures that apply to the situation), our repentance will be strong and focused. The repentance we see in Ezra 10 flows from the specific, insightful confession of Ezra 9.

I'd encourage you not to rush through confession. Take the time necessary to understand your sin in biblical terms. Confess specific sins that will lead to specific acts of repentance. If you weren't here last Sunday, you can listen to the message on our web site. Identify your specific sin(s): outbursts of anger, bitterness, drunkenness, sensuality, deceit, strife, dissensions, etc.

Second, ***Repentance involves a decisive change in thought/word/deed.***

We don't change independent of the Holy Spirit, but repentance is something we do. We engage our wills and decisively pursue a different course than before. In Ezra 10 there was no doubt whether or not they had repented, right? In a similar way, our repentance will involve a decisive change in thought, word, and deed. By definition, if we're engaging the same sinful habits three months from now, we haven't repented.

I agree with Dallas Willard's statement that the goal isn't merely to avoid sin but to avoid temptation (*Renovation of the Heart*, p. 119). We need to order our lives so that we avoid as much temptation as possible. A spiritually mature person doesn't walk into the jaws of temptation hoping s/he will come out on the other side without sinning. A spiritually mature person avoid as much temptation as possible and prays, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

John Owen pointed out that trying to follow God while making provision for the flesh (willingly walking into temptation) is like "trying to put out a fire with wood and oil" (*Sin and Temptation*, p. 16). Most of the time there's no mystery why we persist in our sin; because we're living our lives the same way we always have we are getting the same results.

If you genuinely want to repent, you will need to make decisive changes in how you think and speak and act. Some of you could tell stories about how you hit rock bottom and decided, "If I don't make some changes I'm going to lose everything that I love." By the grace of God you've made some radical changes that have led to restoration in your relationship with Him and with others.

In Luke 3 when John the Baptist preached at the Jordan River he told people to "bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Their repentance was a decisive change in behavior based on their specific sins.

If you're unwilling to make decisive changes in your life, I'd encourage you to be honest and admit to God, "Sorry, but at this time in my life my sin is more important than a closer walk with You." If you are willing, ask Him to change your heart and bring you to a place where you can repent.

Third, ***Repentance is difficult and painful, sometimes involving significant "loss."***

It's hard to imagine a repentance more difficult and painful than sending away wives and children. But their repentance is instructive for us in case we think that our repentance will be quick and easy and painless. Generally speaking, the more ingrained our sin is the more difficult and painful our repentance. If you have developed a sinful habit over the course of many years, your repentance might involve a sustained effort of renewing your mind, re-ordering your life, and returning to God every time you sin.

Sometimes repentance feels like death - because it is. You are dying to self in specific ways. When you say "no" to the flesh it fights back. And don't forget that we have an

unseen spiritual enemy who is committed to our misery and destruction. Genuine repentance is a declaration of war. Therefore it will be difficult and painful.

Fourth, ***Repentance (usually) requires the help of others in the body of Christ.***

Repentance in Ezra's day involved the entire community. Ezra led in confessing their sin. Shecaniah stepped forward and urged Ezra to take action. Representatives in various cities conducted investigations and made rulings. In the context of this accountability to the larger believing community, the people individually carried out the agreed-upon plan of repentance.

In a similar way, our repentance usually involves the help of others in the body of Christ. You may be convicted of some specific sin that you've confessed to God a hundred times. But you are fairly clueless about the path of repentance; you really don't understand what **you** need to do to chart a different course. You might even feel a little stupid and think, "I should be able to figure this out on my own. I'm a grown man. I shouldn't need to ask somebody, 'Will you help me figure out what it means for me to pursue repentance in this area of my life?'"

I think this is one aspect of "becoming like little children" - which Jesus said is essential in the kingdom. Like a child we need to put away our pride and admit that we're not self-sufficient. We need to "submit to one another" and receive the insight and support of others in the body of Christ. James even said to "confess your sins to one another and pray for each other so that you might be healed" (James 5:16). This is one of the most valuable functions of life groups: you get to know people who might play a strategic role in your life - even your restoration.

I'd like to close by reminding you that repentance isn't punishment. God isn't saying, "You sinned, so now you are gonna pay for it. Repent." No, Jesus has "paid for it." Repentance is a gift that is possible because of what Jesus has done and because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Repentance is only possible because of the Spirit. The same Spirit who convicts us of sin and prompts us to confess our sin also wants to empower us to live differently. The Spirit produces what Paul in 2 Corinthians 7 called "repentance without regret." Instead of regretting that we've turned from our sin, we can't imagine going back to all that guilt and shame. And so we say to God, "In my life, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."