

A Call to Repentance and Separation

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References: **Ezra 10**, Ezra 10:1-5; Deuteronomy 7:1-6; Ezra 9:3-4; Ezra 9:15; Ezra 10:26; Ezra 7:25-26; Ezra 9:1-2; Ezra 10:7-8; Ezra 10:9; Ezra 8:33; Ezra 8:18; Ezra 10:6; Ezra 10:10-15; 2 Corinthians 6:17-18; 2 Corinthians 7:1

Public Conviction and Confession

So, it's the book of Ezra and chapter 10. We'll have comments going back to fill in the context, but we're going to start in chapter 10 this evening. And we'll just read a few verses together, and then we'll go verse by verse. I'll have some comments, and our other brethren will have comments. We'll ask the Lord for a blessing. Chapter 10:

[Ezra 10:1-5 NKJV]

¹ Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly. ² And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. ³ Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴ Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it." ⁵ Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath.

And then we'll get into more details later on. But this particular story is a very strange story. And it's an amazing story. I can understand the problem arising. I can understand Ezra being very alarmed by it. But when I get to the middle of verse 1 of chapter 10, and it says:

...a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.

I say, how was it possible that this man was able to raise such a strong response to the evil that had gone on? How was it that he was able to effect such an outstanding response?

And I guess one of the reasons is that through all of this—well, I guess first of all, I should say, Ezra was an outstanding man. And there were those who came with him out of Babylon, and they no doubt witnessed him for the long journey. They watched him. They were persuaded he was a good man to follow him in the first place. They watched him as he led them through the wilderness down to Jerusalem, and they probably gained a great respect for him. He was a teacher of the law, as we heard this morning. He was a student. He was a teacher. He decided he was going to learn it, he was going to teach it, and that he would teach it in a way that they would understand. So I think they had a lot of respect for him.

But the other thing is that I think his response was a very public response of prayer. He did pray, no question, but I can't remember all the details. He prayed in such a way that people knew something was wrong. What do we have here? He was weeping. He cast himself down before the house of God. I suppose when you see the preacher weep, does it sort of grab you and you say, "What was that? That must be very important to him." What would it mean when he cast himself down before the house of God? They would say, "What's Ezra doing lying down over there?" And a big impact on him.

I've told you before many times the story of—what's the man who came out of India, that preacher that we all know? Silas Fox. Yeah, thank you, Silas Fox. Silas Fox was in India, but he was a man of prayer. And his boys, because they were boys and because they had lots of energy and because it got too hot in the day, they would get up early in the morning to go for a bike ride. And when they went for a bike ride, they would find that their father, Silas, was lying flat on the floor praying. And to go bike riding, they had to literally walk over the prostrate body of their father. And you're not surprised that they said, "That made an effect on us. That had an effect on us. That's the kind of father we had."

I think the people, when they saw the many things—I just illustrated the two from this verse. I think if you were to add them all up in this section, you'd probably find there were eight or ten or more things that he did which were visible signs of his prayer life. And I think that had a big effect on people. Sometimes it's good for you to pray in your closet by yourself. Other times it's good to pray in public. So that, I guess, I just find very interesting.

They came to him. A very great congregation of people came to him: men, women, and children. Again, Dave spoke to us about this this morning or yesterday, I can't remember. But the children were involved. Let the children see when the problems are there. Don't say, "We've got an issue; go hide." Sometimes you say to the children, "We've got an issue. You come here. You pray with us too." And the children came. They knew there was a big problem here. And probably some of those children came saying, "What's going to happen to our friends? Got some friends down the block, and their daddy's a believer and their mother is an Amorite. And our daddy never should have married that woman. What's going to happen to those children?" Big issue. And this thing, therefore, though it arose quickly, it had probably a nationwide, a society-wide, a culture-wide impact. They knew what was going on; they saw what was going on.

So for some reason, and many reasons, Ezra was followed. Verse 2: Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, to this assembly. And I just think Ezra must have been very, very encouraged when Shechaniah said, "Don't worry, Ezra, I am with you." And so you get down to verse 4. Shechaniah says, "For this matter belongs to you, Ezra." He's basically saying, "Ezra, you're the man. You have got to take a stand." And then he says, "But we'll be with you." In the beginning, he says, "I'll be with you." Now he's saying, "We'll be with you. Ezra, get up there and do what you got to do."

If I were Ezra, I'd say, "I think I got to run home now." But he didn't do that. And Shechaniah said, "Ezra, you got to do it." And Shechaniah said, "Ezra, I'm with you, and many of us are with you." I just marvel at—when there are difficult things to be done in the house of God, in the family, among your friends, if you think they're doing the right thing, if God convicts you that they're doing the right thing, tell them that you're with them, encourage them, and help them. Men of God, women of God, we all need help and encouragement.

The Danger of Compromise and Intermarriage

All right, so those are some introductory comments on those verses, and David and Eric will probably have some thoughts on those verses. One of the things I think that's so encouraging is what it says here: is that they will swear to do according to this word, and according to the word of God.

I was looking earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 7, just before verse 6 where he says the Lord has chosen you to be a special people to Himself, above all people from the face of the earth. The Lord has set His love upon you and to choose you. He did not set His love upon you nor choose you because you were the greatest of number, but you were the fewest, but because He would be faithful, and so forth. But over earlier in verse 1:

[Deuteronomy 7:1-6 NKJV]

¹ "When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, ² and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. ³ Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. ⁵ But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. ⁶ "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.

So you see the seriousness. And Ezra knew the seriousness of intermarriage with nations around them. And yet they do this. And I think generations—past generations—the word of God is not taught, and we don't have teachers like Ezra, or we don't have teachers in our own day, and we don't have people who study the word of God and have convictions in our own day. And so we begin to make compromise and concessions.

And we see this happening in many different ways in the church today. We find those who are not believers being elders and leaders and preachers, and so many different things. We compromise in so many ways. It's interesting to me in chapter 7 where it says the Lord will destroy you; this will anger the Lord when you go after other gods, and yet they did it.

In fact, at the end of Nehemiah, Nehemiah chapter 13, you find that the leaders, the high priests, gave the son of Tobiah, who was an enemy of Israel, a room in the house of God. And Nehemiah had to come and actually physically take him and all his furniture and throw him out of the house of God. So they had good leaders, Nehemiah and Ezra, and they had to lead; they had to make a stand.

And so we see, and as Harold has said, we see Ezra leading, and I think that's so important. He's leading by his actions. He's leading by his prayer. He's leading by verse 1, where he confesses, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God. And I think there's a great need for godly leaders who, in some cases, weep in their prayers and have a real heart

—a real heart for God and a real heart to obey God, even when it's difficult and even when it's hard to obey God. And that's what you see in these verses that we've looked at so far.

And this was a problem all through Israel's history: the problem as they went through the wilderness, and sexual immorality in the nation of Israel, and in the church in the New Testament. And it's a problem today. And we find the need to take a stand and to be obedient to God's word.

And that's something that Harold brought out here. You know, we're going to swear to the word of God. We're going to do it. In 2 Chronicles 34, under the revival under Josiah, when the word of God is found and his heart is tender, he begins to read the word of God. He gathers the elders and the leaders together, and he says to them about the word of God, "We want you to swear to it. We want you to promise you will obey the word of God." And I think that's what happens with great leaders: they promise to follow the word of God no matter what. And I just say to ourselves, may we be that kind of people. May we continue to be that kind of people.

There are people today in lands where it is very difficult to be a Christian, right? It's very difficult to be in India. It's very difficult to be in China. And those lands where people are faithful to the Word of God, they're going to take a stand, and they're going to follow the Lord—not compromise, not follow after the people of that area, of that nation, and follow the gods of those peoples. So we see this in this first section, and it's a great challenge and great encouragement to us to have good leaders, but also to follow the Word of God.

The Weight of Corporate Guilt

You know, it's very surprising to me. Well, I have to just alter my statement: it's not that surprising. The very fact of why they were exiled to Babylon was because they really have to rediscover the truth for themselves and to buy it for themselves again. It's not something that can be inherited, as we see.

Harold mentioned and you mentioned again that Ezra was a great man, certainly. But it was his reaction to what he found. He was all ready for some type of revival because he had prepared himself for this very fact of coming to teach the Word of God. Even the edict of Artaxerxes was that he should do that. And so he was ready to improve the spiritual condition of the people, but he didn't realize just how bad things really were. It was far worse than he anticipated.

And in chapter 9, the leaders came to him and the priests and told him. We don't know who these leaders were, but they were obviously a small group of a remnant that had been left, a

godly remnant. And they said, "You know, this is what's happening, Ezra." In chapter 9, they came to him, and the first thing he did, when he heard this in verse 3:

[Ezra 9:3-4 NKJV]

³ So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

So his reaction was an extreme reaction. But then his prayer, which was not a prayer of intercession—we mentioned this last time. This wasn't an intercessory prayer. He was not praying on behalf of the nation. It was a prayer of confession. 'Cause in chapter 10, verse 1, it says:

Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God...

So it was his reaction to this. He took on, as it were, the very sins of the whole nation. "It's our sins." And I think of our Lord Jesus: He took upon Himself our sins. Surely He has borne our sins; He has carried our iniquities. He took upon Himself those on the cross. But here we see this great man Ezra abasing himself. He was of the high priestly caste, and he was a very well-known man and honorable man. And for him to lower himself and humble himself in public!

But I think what motivated him on this was that he recognized the unity of the people of God. Like the sin of Achan—I think we mentioned last time. The sin of Achan, we read that Israel has sinned, the Lord said. That's why they couldn't stand up to the small army that came out of the city of Ai. They lost 3,000 men in that battle out of a small city. And so it was Israel that had sinned, but it was only really one man, Achan, who had sinned. That sin had weakened the whole nation.

So I think that Ezra here recognizes the unity of the people of God. And so we too: what affects one member of the body of Christ affects the whole body. One part of the body can't say, "Well, you know, just because another part is diseased, that it's not my fault." It's the fault of the whole body; the whole body must take corrective actions. So I think that he

recognized the unity of the people of God. If there was any problem, the whole lump was going to be affected. A little leaven leavens the whole lump is a New Testament way of putting this.

So his prayer was all confession. Here we are before You in the last verse of chapter 9, verse 15:

[Ezra 9:15 NKJV]

O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!"

He saw that it was the guilt of the whole nation, and himself included. And so in his humility and humbling and confessing in public, now it says in verse 1, this very large assembly of men, women, and children were gathered to him. I can see them streaming in as the word gets out that Ezra is praying. He's weeping over those things that we knew that were wrong, but we did nothing about it. And so they're gathering a great number. In chapter 9, it was just those who trembled at the word. Now it's a very great assembly that are coming and joining in, realizing their departure from the living God.

The Stand of Shechaniah and Civil Authority

Then down in verse 2, we read of Shechaniah. And we're told who he is: he's the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam. And in verse 26 of that same chapter, if we read about his father was one of those, and his uncles perhaps, cousins:

[Ezra 10:26 NKJV]

of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Eliah;

His whole family was involved. And so he had a very personal connection to this departure. And it must have greatly disturbed and troubled this guy. And he's the one who came. He must have given this some thought, but didn't know how to get out of it. It wasn't until God sent Ezra that Shechaniah realized that God now had probably already answered his prayer. He was probably praying before this. These things didn't just come out of the blue.

He not only says that "we have trespassed against our God"—he too realizes the unity of the people of God. He says, "We have taken pagan wives," speaking of his family and of the people of the land, "yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God."

He calls Ezra his master. And Ezra actually had been given not only God's authority for this, but he had the authority of Artaxerxes as well. Because in the decree of Artaxerxes, it's found there in verses 25 to 26:

[Ezra 7:25-26 NKJV]

²⁵ And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them. ²⁶ Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

So he was given civil authority over that. And that's, I think, why Shechaniah is bold enough to come to Ezra and say, "Arise, for this matter is your responsibility." In the King James, he says, "This matter belongeth unto thee." And I think you interpreted it quite rightly there, Harold: "You're the man." The New King James says:

"Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it."

So another thing we might mention then is that the advice of Shechaniah is that let it be done according to the law—the law of God he's speaking about here, which in Deuteronomy chapter 24 makes provision for divorce. So that if a letter of divorcement is given to these women that would be put away, it was a proper separation so that then they could remarry. It would not be a disgrace in the sense of a banishment for them that they would never be able to remarry, these pagan wives that they would put away. So his advice was that they would do it according to the law, which would lessen the separation of these men from their pagan wives and provide for them in a way that they would not necessarily suffer being put away.

And so there was some provision for that if they would put their gods away and their religions away. And it seems here that these women they married, they never did that. They were fully engaged in the worship of the nations around them. And I think it's in chapter 9 where it says:

[Ezra 9:1-2 NKJV]

¹ When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ² For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass."

So that was the shocking thing, surprising thing: that they would not only marry these wives, but they've engaged themselves in the religions of these people. And Ezra sees that. And just as you had said before, they have a history of following gods and the idolatry of other nations, and now they go back into their land, and they go back into the same thing—and a relatively large number. And so I think this is one of the things that really was shocking to Ezra.

Maybe that's why in chapter 10 he cast himself weeping and confesses, and he says, thinking of my people, what they have done. You know, they get back into the land, they've been given these decrees, they've been given these opportunities to go back to Jerusalem and to worship and to rebuild the walls eventually, and they go back into the same idolatry that their forefathers had been involved in beforehand.

We'll see later on, there were actually only about 113 or 114 that were actually put away. They had this commission of inquiry that was set up, and it took them three months to interview all these families and to sort things out. But there were only about 113 or 114 that actually were put away. The rest may have converted. There may have been many more that actually did convert, like Ruth and Rahab and so on, and were brought into the commonwealth. But it took this commission that they set up with proper judges, and they were done by local leaders and judges. Later on, it wasn't just a Supreme Court type of thing where it was anonymous. These were local magistrates and judges that knew the people so that they could judge properly and fairly.

The Call to Assemble

Well, maybe before we carry on, just a couple of comments. Make sure we understand that the big problem was verse 3:

"Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them..."

That was the very serious demand that was being recommended by Ezra and Shechaniah and those who were with them, and by their understanding of the law of God.

The other thing is, were they aware that this could be a problem? And the answer is yes. They all knew about a man whose name was Solomon. And Solomon married a lot of these women, and they ultimately turned his own heart, let alone the hearts of others. The fact is that these people knew better. They may have been encouraged by one another to do what's wrong, but they knew. They weren't foolish. They understood Deuteronomy, the verses we've read, and others. They knew all about Solomon. They knew they were getting into deep trouble.

So we get down to verse 6 again. Ezra didn't eat bread and didn't drink water. After a while, you get a little hungry and thirsty. And he basically said, "Doesn't matter how hungry and thirsty I get." Paul went three days and three nights without water when he got saved. And so I guess this man is laying a precedent for Paul: he didn't eat bread or drink water.

[Ezra 10:7-8 NKJV]

⁷ And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem, ⁸ and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity.

That's a pretty strong commandment. Everybody's coming to Jerusalem now, in three days. And each of them said, "Well, that's all well and good. You know, I got plans for tomorrow. And actually, I got a golf game on the next day. And I've got to, I've got to, I've got to..." And every one of them had days of excuses.

And Ezra said, "You come to Jerusalem." And then he said if you don't come—and I said it was Ezra, but really it was the counsel of the princes and the elders that were behind Ezra in this. It wasn't just Ezra's edict; it was the elders, the princes who were with them. What happens if you don't come? All his substance should be forfeited. What's that mean? Well, you lose your house. You lose your car. You lose your furniture. You lose your farm. What? Just because you don't come to Jerusalem in three days? And in addition to that, you'll be separated from the congregation of those who had been carried away. You came back as children of Israel, but you'll be separated from them.

I guess my question is, did these people take this sin seriously? Yes. Did they take seriously the fact that something should be done about it? And the answer is yes. Now, we've got a problem in our day: number one, there's a lot of sin that isn't taken seriously; number two, there's a big problem in that very often nothing is done about it. What are we going to do about the sin? What are we going to do about the sin amongst us? What are we going to do about personal sin? Is sin serious?

And this whole story in the book of Ezra says sin is serious. It's got to be taken seriously. And if it's in me, it's got to be taken seriously. And if it's in my brothers, it's got to be taken seriously. I just marvel at this whole story. Verse 9:

[Ezra 10:9 NKJV]

So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of heavy rain.

I suppose some of them had to come in the middle of the night. It's awfully hard to make rearrangements to be there in three days. Some of them got to ride on donkeys and some of them had to walk. And I think some of them had to run because they had to be there within three days. Leaders took it seriously, and I marvel that the people took it seriously.

Any more comments up to the end of verse 9? That's my little comment.

You know, you see the princes and the elders, but I wonder if it wasn't for Ezra if they would have taken it seriously. This went on for quite a while. This didn't happen just overnight. The marriages and the children that were being born—this took quite a while. And the elders of the people were there for a while, and the princes were there, and life went on, and everything went on as normal. But it took someone with conviction. It took someone with

moral clarity. It took someone who would take a stand, and be very visible in that stand, and be very influential and very impactful to these elders and these leaders to get them to act.

And I think sometimes that's what it takes: someone who is a moral leader to be able to go, whether it be in a local assembly, whether it be in a government, maybe a community. It takes sometimes someone who causes the others to act. Now, they do act, and give some praise to them for that. But I think it goes back to verse 1 and earlier, to the prayer and the confession of chapter 9 of Ezra. It takes a man like Ezra. And maybe in our own day, sometimes it takes someone of this kind of character, this kind of moral strength, to begin to move within a nation, within the people, to get them to do what had to be done.

I don't think they would have done these things if it wasn't for someone like Ezra to put the whole process in motion through the strength, through the force of his spiritual convictions and his teaching and all that he did. And I think, probably as Eric brought up, because he had the civil authority, he could make an edict, he could rule in a certain way, and they could lose everything. And so that makes people move when you can lose everything. But it took someone like Ezra to act in this way, and so it's a real commendation to him.

And as you said, I think we need more and more of that. Sometimes things get swept under the rug in a sense, but it always comes back when it's not dealt with properly.

So I would push that one step further. I think in a nation, it needs an Ezra. I think in an assembly, it needs a man of God to stand up—an overseer or someone else. But in a family, going back to yesterday, Daddy and Mommy have got to stand up and say, "That's not the way we do it in this house." And I can remember as a child my mother and father saying to me, "That's the way they do it next door, Harold, but that's not the way we do it here. Okay?" But sometimes it's not quite as easy as it was in our home. Sometimes it's really tough, and Daddy's got to stand. That's tough.

I believe you're right. He was certainly a catalyst, and was able to get the authority that he did to get the king on board. But this was a culmination of a long life of godliness, that he had a reputation in Babylon as a great holy man of God. And so when he arrived there, I think there were already men like Shechaniah who'd probably been grieving over this for a long time, but maybe didn't have the ability or the opportunities that were needed to rise to that. His whole family was involved, and probably they laughed at him like Job was laughed at by his contemporaries. So it's a wonderful thing that we see this man arrive.

I think you're right. And I've highlighted in my Bible, in chapter 8, when Ezra arrived with the materials—he arrived with gold and so forth that they brought from Babylon—it was brought into the hand of one man. It was weighed out:

[Ezra 8:33 NKJV]

Now on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui,

Now, it's interesting about this gentleman. It says he was a priest, but what I love about this individual, when you go to chapter 3 of Nehemiah, when you have the building of the wall, you have the same man mentioned. In fact, he's mentioned twice. He works in two areas. He finishes one area, and then he goes to Nehemiah or the supervisors and he says, "Is there anything else I can do?" He works in another area.

And I think this man was a unique individual. This man was a man of great moral strength for them to weigh it out to his hands, that all the gold, all that was brought back, he was the one that was weighed out and actually put into storehouses. But here's an individual, like you're saying, that I think was also significant. It's not mentioned in chapter 9 and chapter 10, but he's certainly a key figure if you go into Nehemiah. And he was a key figure when Ezra arrived, and he was a man of loyalty and honesty. And he's called a priest at the same time. And it says Eleazar was with him as well. Eliashib was not mentioned here; we find out later on he's quite corrupt. But here, in verse 33, when the materials come back and when Ezra comes, it is weighed into the hands of Meremoth the son of Uriah.

Yeah, there was another Levite named Sherebiah in chapter 8 and verse 18:

[Ezra 8:18 NKJV]

Then, by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and brothers, eighteen men;

And we read about Sherebiah later on: he was there standing with Nehemiah at the dedication of the wall. And he became very prominent, and it was the Levites that were teaching when Ezra was reading. We read in Nehemiah that it was the Levites that actually were the cell group leaders, you might say, teaching the people. So, yeah, there are these individuals that surrounded these men, supported them, and continued their work, and encouraged them too. Because Ezra was only a man. We mustn't raise him to the point of comparing him to some Christ-like figure. He was a catalyst; that's the word that I always

use. He was certainly a leader, a catalyst, and he had some moral strength that drew other people around him. But he had others who would support him, and though a little lesser, they were strong believers.

Private Grief and Public Resolution

Then verse 6:

[Ezra 10:6 NKJV]

Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

His very public prayer of confession certainly brought many people to their senses and made them weigh the circumstances of their lives, realizing just how far they had gone and that there was a way out. They began to come. Ezra rose up and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, and he ate no bread and drank no water. So he went into a period of secret mourning. Now it was no longer a public thing; he mourned privately before the Lord, weeping before the Lord and mourning.

I'm just thinking now, as he mourned and grieved over the sins of the nation, we think of the New Testament: we have the Holy Spirit now who can be grieved over the sins of the people of God. "Grieve not the Spirit of God." So that would be the very Spirit of God that was grieving in his private grief over the people of God. It's a picture for us of the Holy Spirit's operation right now in our day, where the Holy Spirit is grieving over sin. Perhaps there had been many like Shechaniah who had been grieving privately in his own home about his uncles and his father and so on, and their associations.

They issued this proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity that they must gather at Jerusalem. So it was just in Judah and Jerusalem; they didn't have to travel from Galilee. They didn't live up in Naphtali and so on; they were fairly localized. And a three-day travel would not be too difficult for just in that local area of Judah and Benjamin, because it would be fairly close. Jerusalem was centered actually on the border of Benjamin and Judah, so it would be fairly central, fairly easy to get to in three days. It might be a long three days for some, but nevertheless easy enough to do.

And then it says that all their property would be confiscated, and they would be separated from the assembly as well. Ezra had the magisterial power delegated to him by Artaxerxes to actually confiscate goods. He really had a hook in them to make sure that they all came up to Jerusalem.

So they all gathered there within three days. And it was, of course, that's our December. And if anybody knows Jerusalem, it probably has a climate very similar to Vancouver. It can snow there; it snows here. In the winter in December, it's cold and it's wet. Have you ever been here in December? I've been in Jerusalem in December, and it was snowing, and it's quite an elevation so it can get pretty cold. You get cold. And have you ever been to Vancouver at that time? Not in December. No, we don't invite you because if we ever did that, you'd never come back! I went back in February.

Now, this West Coast cold is different: it goes right through. It's a wet chill off the ocean, and people who work on the ocean know what I'm talking about. So it can get very cold here and not very comfortable. It may not be freezing, but I can imagine them standing outside during this time of heavy rain. And they trembled. Not many of us in Vancouver, even who are used to the weather, would be wanting to stand out in the rain, unless it was something so important now that had been brought before them that they almost were impervious to the weather. The Spirit of God moved them so much that they braved the weather.

Decisive Action and Local Administration

[Ezra 10:10-15 NKJV]

¹⁰ Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives." ¹² Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do. ¹³ But there are many people; it is the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor is this the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter. ¹⁴ Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter." ¹⁵ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support.

One note that I made here is that Shechaniah said, "Separate the wives and those that were born to them." That was his recommendation. But it doesn't seem that the people agreed with that. It would seem wrong to exclude the children because children can be taught. They haven't done wrong; they could probably be educated and taught in the truth of Jehovah and the doctrines of the law of Moses.

It is their idolatry and everything they bring. It will separate them from the one true God and it will lead their sons away from the one true God and the worship of God. And so it's not because of their skin color or whatever background they came from; it's what they believe, and their religion that they had, and their idolatry that they had.

Yeah, and the Lord had a heart for the stranger. Over and over in the books of Moses, there's provision made for orphans and widows and the strangers among you. And the stranger, if he was circumcised, could eat the Passover even. So the Lord made no discrimination as far as nationhood. You're right, that's a good point.

So verse 10 says, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel." What was the problem? The problem was if they took these women, the trespass of Israel would have been increased. That's the big issue. The trespass of Israel would have been augmented simply by the fact that all these children would be there who were not godly children. What do you read about Solomon's sons? Solomon had a thousand wives. I don't know if anybody counted his sons. He had only one named son. But I'm not sure that he didn't have other sons, and he certainly had other daughters because we read of his sons-in-law.

So the point that I'm making is that you tend to be like those you grew up with. And Solomon's families lived up on the hill of offense, and the children grew up together, and they weren't godly. And so the effect of the sin is that they will increase the trespass of Israel.

Now, therefore, make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will, and separate yourselves from the people of the land and from the pagan wives. And verse 12:

Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do."

I think that's an absolutely marvelous conclusion—obviously one that the Spirit of the Lord granted because of the prayer of Ezra. But when the decision was made as to what should be done, the nation said, "Yes, we will do it." Praise the Lord!

Verse 13:

"But there are many people; it is the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor is this the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter. Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter."

So what they're basically saying is: we acknowledge that this is a problem, but there's got to be an administrative organization so that the problem can be dealt with in a proper way. And Eric has mentioned the fact that it was a local problem: the elders came, and those who were guilty came, and in a just and equitable way the matter was resolved. It wasn't simple. They dealt with each matter individually, independently. And we believe, reading between the lines, that it was done equitably in that—we don't know the detail, but I don't think that the wives and the children were cast out on the street to fend for themselves. I think that provision was probably made for them, but they were not to be part of the people of God. They were not to be involved in the work of God; they were to be separated from the people of God.

So they did that. Verse 15 mentions Jonathan the son of Asahel, Jahaziah the son of Tikvah, Meshullam, and Shabbethai the Levite. There were four who were designated to be part of the administration that would bring these people to a just conclusion and would do what is right. Each person—Eric saying 114 of them, plus or minus—each one would be dealt with individually and, I believe, equitably and properly. It was all done in a very good way. So those are my thoughts down to the end of verse 15.

I think this phrase in verse 12 that you mentioned: "As you have said, so must we do." It doesn't even say "so we will do," but "we must do." And I'm thinking that these wives, they come from the exact same area that they live in. The nations are around the city of Jerusalem; they're surrounded by these nations. And so it has to be a heart decision. If it's not a heart decision, it's never going to work, because the families and the nations live right where they are.

And so I think that desire they seem to have—"As you have said, so must we do. We're going to do this thing, and we're going to set them aside"—must be very difficult. You have your

families maybe in the same area, maybe not that far away, and you might even see them. But it's got to be a heart decision to say, "No, we will separate from them."

Practical Applications: Marriage and Separation

All right. Well, maybe we can just see if we can apply this to ourselves. We live in a world where marriages are important, just as important as they were then. The question is, who are you going to marry and how? So I simply ask myself the question: what are the issues that are raised by this story for us?

Number one is that marrying someone who is not a committed believer to the Lord Jesus Christ, marrying someone where there is an unequal yoke, is a most serious problem. And how serious is it? Well, this particular section is in the book of Ezra. Frankly, I am shocked when I think that it actually went like this. This was not a quiet thing; this was a big deal. And there are a lot of wives who were brokenhearted, a lot of fathers who were brokenhearted, a lot of husbands and a lot of children who were brokenhearted. This was a big deal.

And so we have in our day the same situation. And the issue is, are the believers going to marry the unbeliever or not? And when you get to be as old as me, you've accumulated a fair amount of experience in that you've seen situations. And frankly, I've seen too many situations of broken hearts, broken families, broken lives because the individual married someone who was not a committed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. So number one: it is a very serious problem.

What's the second implication? The second implication is: **don't do it.**

And the third implication is: **don't allow it.** We read in Deuteronomy, and here we read in Ezra as well, both lines say don't do it; and fathers, don't give your daughters; fathers, don't give your sons. And sometimes the father has got to say, "No, you are not going to marry that woman." And frankly, that could be a real problem in a family.

And the assembly may very well have to say, "Sorry, we can't marry you." Sometimes they come to us and they say, "I would like to marry." And you have to say, "I'm sorry, no. You're a believer. He's not a believer. She's not a believer. We can't marry you. You're going to have to get somebody else to marry you. We can't do that."

When does the father first say, "No, you can't marry that woman"? Well, I suppose you could say that he would say that when the man says, "I just got to tell you, I proposed to so-and-so

last night, and we're going to get married." And the father says no? It doesn't make any sense to me. When does the father say no? Well, the father says no way back when.

I told you yesterday the story about my sister, and she will tell you that it's true. She went to Sunday school when she was, I think, five or six years old. And her Sunday school teacher said, "You've got to start praying now that the man you're going to marry is going to be the right man." And that's my sister's story.

But I'll tell you my story. The phone rang one night, and I answered the phone. I would probably have been in grade seven. The phone rang, and I answered the phone. When I got off the phone, my mother and father and sister said to me, "Who is that?" And I said, "Well, that was a girl from school." And so they said, "Well, tell me about her." So I told them about her, and they said, "Well, that's very good. You'll have to tell her not to call you again."

I said, "What?"

They said, "Yes, you can't have her calling you."

I said, "Well, she's a nice girl, Mommy. She's a nice girl."

And they said, "You just told us she's not a believer. You just told us she doesn't know the first thing about God, and you are not going to have her calling you. The more she calls you, the more you might be attracted to her, and the more she might be attracted to you. So you're just going to have to say no."

And so I sit back and I say, well, frankly, that's pretty tough. Was that good advice or not?

Well, I can tell you similar advice. I invited a boy from our school to my backyard one day, and I said to him, "We're going to play marbles." He had a lot of marbles, and I figured that if I played with him, we could get a lot of marbles. And so anyway, we were playing for about five minutes. My mother called me into the house. And I said, "Mother, what do you want me for? We're playing marbles."

She said, "I know. You tell that boy he can go home now."

I said, "What? You want me to tell that boy to go home?"

"Yes," she said. "You tell that boy to go home now. I don't want you playing with that boy."

Now, I have no idea why she said that; I never could figure it out. All I know is that thirty-five, forty years later, a man in the assembly came up to me and said, "I'd like you to pray for my family." I said, "Okay."

Teach the children. Keep on teaching the children. Teach them when they're young. Somehow we've got to deal with the issue. The great issues of tomorrow, we've got to deal

with them today. Because if we don't deal with them today, they're not going to know how to handle them today or tomorrow.

So anyway, those are my concerns. Let me just give you the five issues for us:

1. It is a serious problem.
2. Don't do it.
3. Don't allow it.
4. Repent of it.
5. And number five: logic would say, "Well, it's done. There's nothing we can do about it now." And the answer is, of course, there's something we can do about it now! That's what this story is all about. If it happened, then do something about it. I'm not going to tell you tonight what to do, but we've got to do something about it. This story says, don't just sit there—do something.

What are the issues? The issues are: this is serious. We've got to be very careful not to pretend that that happened 2,500 years ago and we don't have to worry about it. Our time is more than gone. I went over time; I apologize.

Eric, one comment: it has a much wider application than that. In the New Testament, we find in 2 Corinthians chapter 6:

[2 Corinthians 6:17-18 NKJV]

¹⁷ Therefore

"Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you."

¹⁸ "I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty."

Their sin was idolatry. Our sin is idolatry. And today, there's all different kinds of idolatry that people might be dabbling with in their lives: it might be material wealth, or great education, or whatever it might be. These become idols. And then chapter 7, verse 1 really is a continuation:

[2 Corinthians 7:1 NKJV]

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Spiritual adultery is what much of the church of God today is involved with—spiritual idolatry and spiritual adultery. So that application that we see there of actually physically separating from the ungodly wives, we can make that a spiritual application for all separation. And so I imagine next week we'll get into the concept, the New Testament concept of separation, which really Ezra opens up and gives illustrations of. Amen. Thank you.

Closing Prayer

Our God and Father, we thank You for this time tonight. We thank You for this portion of chapter 9 and chapter 10 of the Book of Ezra. We thank You for a man such as Ezra. Thank You for raising that kind of man up. And we pray You might raise up those kinds of men in our local churches and our assemblies in various places. We need more and more men with conviction, with leadership abilities to do what is right, that are near You and take action.

And so, Father, we thank You. And the principles that were brought out: this is a serious thing to bring idolatry into the families of God. And so, Father, it's a good illustration, a good challenge, a good exhortation to us. And so, Father, may we take it to heart.

And we pray for this coming week. We pray for tomorrow morning. We pray for Vacation Bible School. We pray for all the adults that will be there, the children that will be there. We pray, Father, that the weather will not be such that would hinder anyone from coming. And we pray those who come will come with an open heart and open mind. Pray for those that don't know You as Savior, that they will hear the gospel clearly explained and that You might work in their hearts, that they may trust Christ as their Savior.

And so we pray these things and commit these things to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.