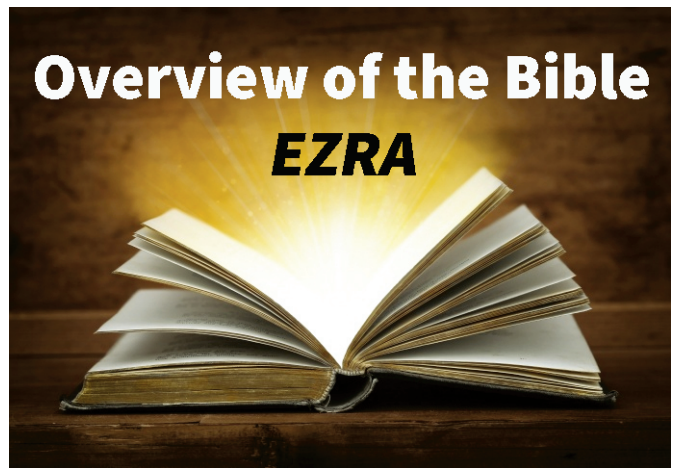


The Message of Ezra Not a Happy Ending

Ezra 10:1-44
Lesson 130

Wednesday, May 24, 2023



It is easy to become frustrated with Bible history; we want happy endings and neatly packaged solutions. The sheer inability of God's people apparently to remember God's words is a recurring theme.

The chapter has two main sections: the peoples' confession and the action taken (vv. 1–17); and the list of those involved in intermarriage (vv. 18–44). For purposes of exposition, we shall, however, look at it in four main sections, commenting on both the flow of the story and its theological implications.

1. Hope because of the covenant (10:1–8)

The emotion in this section is unrestrained and the seriousness of the situation beyond doubt. The verbs, such as *confessing*, *weeping*, and *throwing himself down* do not sound like the conventional 'ordinances of religion', because most of us, in fact, do not take sin very seriously. However, this is no mere emotional display; this leads to serious and considered action which is to be the subject of the chapter.

Ezra no doubt felt at this point that he might as well have stayed in Babylon and that his efforts to teach and reform had been a failure. Now we see that this is not the case. His own seriousness and passion, far from inviting ridicule, had in fact stirred a response. Better, although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in the chapter, he had clearly been at work in hearts and lives. This was no draconian measure forced on a reluctant community by a rigid reformer; this was an outpouring of genuine emotion—*they too wept bitterly* (v. 1)—and of sober response—*we have been unfaithful* (v. 2). The confession comes before the hope that God will be merciful.

Shecaniah, who acts as spokesman for the community, uses the phrase *in accordance with the council of my lord* (v. 3) which suggests that Ezra's words and actions had directed their decision although not specifically mandating it. This meant that the response was genuine and that it was to be thorough. This is underlined by the reference to *covenant* and *according to the Law* (v. 3). What is happening here is, in fact, a covenant renewal ceremony which echoes the great reforms of Josiah and beyond that echoes Joshua's covenant renewal.³

The importance of the covenant and its renewal cannot be overstated. God is faithful and, while by no means clearing the guilty, welcomes back the repentant sinner. The covenant of God is unilateral; a gift of grace to which we contribute nothing. Yet to enjoy the benefits of that covenant there needs to be response and this needs to be ongoing. Not to respond would be like going through a marriage ceremony and then saying to your spouse 'we may meet each other again some time'.

But this powerful emotional response needed to be translated into action, which expressed itself in two ways. These are summarized in the two verbs in verses 5 and 6: Ezra *rose up* and Ezra *withdrew*. The 'rising up' initiated the necessary action which involved both the leaders and the people. The further activities are summarized in verses 7–8 and show the necessity of communal confession of communal sin. Failure would attract the drastic penalty of expulsion.

In either case, the meaning is clear. Failure to attend would involve being cut off from the community with all that this involved in being excluded from daily sacrifices and loss of rights as citizens. Although Ezra was behind this, it was a communal decision (v. 8) and thus comes with greater force.

But this action is buttressed by Ezra's withdrawing. The public prayer had spurred the people to action but now we see that this was no mere gesture. His continued prayer and fasting underlined the need for the action that was about to be taken. Prayer and action must always go together; when an immediate answer comes it is still always necessary to pray and to continue to seek God's further will and guidance.

This section has focused on the true nature of the covenant relationship with the Lord. He is the injured party; the wounded Lover and no cheap or easy protestations of regret will restore that broken relationship. Only Ezra's deep and genuine confession on the peoples' behalf and the action this provoked could begin the way back to true fellowship. Underlying all this is the conviction that the only way to keep that covenant relationship alive is to follow the Torah (v. 3). That is not a gospel of good works. Rather the Lord, in his grace, has given that word to guide us through this world. This remains true in the new covenant: 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love' (John 15:10); these words of Jesus are only one of many places in the New Testament where loving God in a covenant relationship is intertwined with obedience to his word.

2. Communal repentance (10:9–15)

This is a vivid and poignant little scene which shows not only a serious spiritual concern, but an acute awareness of the human factors involved. The wonderful expression in verse 9, *greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain* encapsulates that wet, tired, uncomfortable, and shaking, the people are still also trembling at the word of God. Here is no cozy seminar but a meeting full of crosscurrents of intense emotion.

The scene is set. Ezra speaks briefly and the people respond. Three elements comprise Ezra's speech. First, he goes to the root of the problem: *you have been unfaithful* (v. 10). Behind this particular failure is the age-old problem of the fickleness of the human heart. Echoing 9:6, Ezra sees these marriages of foreign women as adding to the already Babel-like heap of Israel's sin. Second, he urges *confession* or more exactly 'give praise'. The phrase also occurs in Joshua 7:19 where Achan is urged to 'give glory to God'. An essential element in confession is acknowledging that God is righteous, which in effect gives him praise and accepts his verdict. Third, Ezra urges practical action. The doing of God's will in this situation will be marked by separating not just from foreign wives but from all kinds of pagan associations. We shall return to the question of what exactly is at stake here, but for the moment suffice it to say that a clear statement of principle had been made which was to be followed by decisive action.

The people's response shows both the natural human reaction and the spiritual dimension already mentioned. The ready response was no doubt a response to the drenched misery of the place, and a sensible and wise realization that precipitate action would not be the solution. However, the last phrase of verse 13, *we have sinned greatly in this thing*, is an acceptance of their culpability before the law of God.

Practicality and spirituality are both diminished when they are set in opposition to each other. Practicalities without spiritual insight can easily become unprincipled pragmatism. However, there is a kind of super-spirituality, in essence a form of Gnosticism, which denies bodily needs and ordinary emotions and leads to an unattractive legalism. Here we have attention to both the practical issues and the spiritual realities.

This resulted in a sensible and coherent programme of action. Then, as now, a large crowd is no good forum for making decisions. Thus, a representative commission of *officials* (v. 14), probably the *family heads* (v. 16) would sit in Jerusalem and systematically take each village and summon those who had married foreign women. In order to be as fair as possible, these men were to be accompanied by their elders and judges who would have local knowledge relevant to the situation. But again, the spiritual reality of God's fierce anger is the background to all this activity.

There were discordant voices and verse 15 mentions four individuals who did not give their approval to what was proposed. Since there is no comment on exactly why they opposed, or even, indeed, if *opposed this* is the correct translation, this verse has been the subject of much discussion. There are two main possible interpretations: one is that those who opposed saw the resort to divorce as too severe; the other is that they saw it as too lax and that the divorces should have been carried out summarily. The problem is that we are not told anything of the motives of these men and thus cannot tell how we are to assess their attitude. We shall return briefly to this matter as well.

3. Meticulous investigation (10:16–17)

A short section now outlines how these decisions were carried out. Two matters call for comment. The first is that Ezra now takes a leading role.

The second is that the work both began quickly as the commission first sat only ten days after the public gathering, and its work was done meticulously as it lasted for some three months. It completed its work exactly a year after Ezra first set out from Babylon (7:9). This work cannot have been easy: winter weather may have caused delays and we have no idea how individual cases would have been handled. In any case the work was carried out, and there the narrative of Ezra effectively ends.

4. Naming and shaming (10:18–44)

Here we shall make some comments on the list of names and then examine the major issues which lie behind it, and indeed the whole of chapters 9 and 10. The list, like the others in Ezra, is carefully arranged. However, unlike the other lists, the priests are mentioned first, with the high priest's own family heading the names:

- High Priest's family (vv. 18–19)
- Other priests (vv. 20–22)
- Levites (v. 24)
- Singer and gatekeepers (v. 24)
- Laity (vv. 25–43)

Plainly the spiritual leaders are mentioned first to underline that they should have taken the lead in righteousness and thus were more culpable. Probably the pledge and the guilt offering, although mentioned only in verse 19 in connection with the priests, should be understood as being part of the procedure for everyone.

Most commentators draw parallels with the list in chapter 2. Nine of the thirty-three families and towns of 2:3–35 reappear here, but there is no reason to argue that the list has been shortened; the practice had not extended to the entire community.

Yet it is not altogether clear how we are to interpret and apply the issues raised in chapters 9 and 10. Several points can be made. The first is that, according to Malachi 2:10–16, many Jewish men had abandoned their wives and married foreign women. This is not mentioned here, but if that were in the background, Ezra's action becomes both more readily understood and more acceptable. It would be a mistake to press this too far as we do not know if this was a relevant factor.

It has been further suggested that most of the women involved would return to their extended families. That sounds reasonable enough, but again we cannot be certain. Since the matter was investigated carefully and thoroughly (vv. 16–17) there would have been time for such arrangements to be made.

When we are looking to apply all this, we remember that the New Testament explicitly rules out divorce in the case of marriage to an unbelieving partner. Indeed 1 Peter 3:1–7 encourages the believing partner to live in such a way that the unbelieving partner will be attracted to the gospel.

In an illuminating comment D. A. Carson points out that the situation can be broadly understood in two ways. The first view is that what happens here is virtually a revival which averts the anger of God and establishes the purity of the post-exilic community. The second view is that the action is inhumane and heartless and, while honoring the law which prohibits mixed marriage, dishonors the one which prohibits easy divorce and doubtless causes untold grief and distress. Carson points out that both views could be legitimate interpretations of the text. Some observations can be made.

The first is one which Carson makes himself, which is that both views contain truth. What Ezra and the community leaders did was justifiable and showed great courage in tackling a problem threatening to destroy the community. Yet there is no sign here of a heart moved with compassion or uneasiness that the action might be far too drastic. He further cites Gideon, Jephthah and Samson as examples of those in situations of complex sinfulness whose actions were less than ideal.

A second point which follows from this is the perpetual problem of avoiding the extremes of legalism and laxity. God's people must always resist the seductive temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Yet it is all too easy to become legalistic and affirm doctrines which are true, but in a harsh and ungracious manner which becomes introverted and unattractive. Such a situation is reflected in John's second and third letters, where the second letter helps Christians to detect false teachers and the third warns against turning away genuine teachers. Here it would have been all too easy to have carried out the letter of the law without a truly changed heart, and Malachi witnesses to the spiritual decadence of both leaders and people. We need to remember too that this was not imposed by Ezra, it was a communal decision and carried out in the name of the leaders of the community.

A third point, which has been made several times during this exposition, is that life is hard and bleak with little sign of spiritual vitality and little sign of springtime, far less the high midsummer pomps. In those circumstances, preserving the distinctiveness of the remnant from whom and to whom the Messiah would come was essential. This is where we need to see these chapters, and indeed the whole book, in the big picture. It was this dejected and downtrodden remnant, successively humbled by Persians, Greeks, and Romans, that the light was to shine upon. It was to them that the sun of righteousness was to arise with healing in his wings and the Lord was suddenly to come to his temple.

Seen from that perspective Ezra as well as Haggai are lights shining in the darkness until the morning star arises. In the bigger story, Ezra is pointing to the holy city where holy people will live, and God's presence will be with them continually. This remnant was the proof that God had not finished with his people and that 'the nations will know that I, the LORD, make Israel holy' (Ezek. 37:28). It lays the groundwork for the appearing of Jesus Christ. And Ezra, like many other biblical books, ends on an unfinished note, but God's purposes continue and will one day come to fulfilment.¹

¹ Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra and Haggai: Building for God*, ed. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 130–137.