

“Make Confession to the Lord”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 10:1-17 (sermon covers all of chapter 10); Romans 2:1-11

What does it mean to repent? Many of our contemporaries act as if repentance simply means to say “I’m sorry,” shed a few tears, promise not to commit the offense again, and then go merrily on their way. In the case of Ezra, given his great sorrow for his people, Israel, repentance is much more than a declaration of “I’m sorry,” followed by a promise to do better. Upon hearing the news that the Jews were again intermarrying with the pagan “people of the land,” (the Canaanites) Ezra went into a time of mourning. After all that Israel had endured—seventy years of exile in Babylon, followed by a difficult return to the land, a prolonged struggle to rebuild the temple and the city which had been destroyed by the Babylonians—Ezra could not believe that the Jews had so quickly grown indifferent to the law of Moses. Before Israel even entered the land of promise, in Deuteronomy 7:1-8, YHWH commanded his people not to intermarry with the Canaanites. But the Jews disobeyed this command in the generations after they first entered the promised land, intermarried with pagan Canaanites, and now are doing so again. After Ezra’s repentance—in the form of mourning for himself and for his people—stirred the people of Israel deeply. Seeing him mourn because of *their* sin and then pray for Israel, the people too repented, and began ending the sinful marriages in which they had engaged, and looked to YHWH for mercy. This is the theme of Ezra 10, our passage before us.

With this sermon we complete our time in the Book of Ezra. We will pick up with the Book of Nehemiah when I return in mid-August. And then we will turn to the Book of Daniel. In the final chapter of Ezra, the account resumes where their narrative left off in chapter 9:5. “*And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God.*” Ezra’s prayer follows in verses 6-15, the tone of which can be seen in verse 6, Ezra’s first petition. “*O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.*” Why is Ezra in a state of mourning? Why is he too ashamed to lift up his prayer to YHWH? What is the great sin which his people have committed?

As we saw last time, before the Israelites entered the promised land, YHWH gave the Israelites clear and explicit instructions that his people were to wipe out the Canaanites (all of them), that the Israelites were to destroy all Canaanite religious shrines, and finally, that the Israelites were not to intermarry with pagans. We noted that the prohibition not to intermarry with the Canaanites was a theological prohibition—not a racial one. Moses married a Midianite. Aaron’s wife was a Cushite (Nubian/African). Joseph married an Egyptian woman. Even Israel’s greatest king, David, had Gentile ancestry. The reason why God forbade intermarriage is not that the Canaanites were of a different race than the Jews. The reason is that the Canaanites were of a different religion than the Jews—they were pagans, worshiped all kinds of so-called “gods,” in and through pagan rituals (often tied to nature), with some of the Canaanites even practicing child sacrifice.

The Jews struggled with this attraction to Canaanite ways from the very time they entered the promised land—the Canaanites were much better at convincing Jews to become syncretists (to add the pagan “gods” to the worship of YHWH), than the Jews were in convincing the Canaanites to worship YHWH alone as the true and living God. Since YHWH is a jealous God, demanding that his people worship him and him

alone, any worship of idols or pagan gods violates the terms of the covenant YHWH made with Israel at Mount Sinai. After much long-suffering patience with his people—who are like an adulterous spouse who continually seeks other lovers—YHWH’s covenant curses came upon Israel in the form of defeat by enemies and then exile from the land. The northern kingdom (Israel) was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC, before the southern kingdom (Judah) was defeated in 587 BC by the Babylonians, with substantial numbers of Jews taken to exile in Babylon—their return serving as the occasion for the writing of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

As leader of a second group of exiles, in 458 BC, Ezra returned to a Jerusalem with a rebuilt temple (the so-called “second temple” which was completed in 516, several generations prior to his own return), and with on-going sacrifices and worship at the temple. And yet, from the time the exiles returned to the Jerusalem area, they almost immediately reverted back to those sinful ways which got them exiled in the first place—with the priests, Levites, and prominent families leading the way, the Jews were once again intermarrying with the pagan Canaanites (the people of the land). As a newly returned exile himself, and a man known for his zeal for the law, Ezra is appalled to learn that this was the case, and upon hearing the news went into a state of mourning. Ezra tore his clothes, pulled his hair, and prayed with great fervor the prayer we read in verses 10–15 of the previous chapter.

“And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.”

Barring the nation’s repentance, Ezra knows the fate which awaits the Jews—a new round of judgment and then exile. How can a people who have endured so much fall right back into the same sins which brought about the exile in the first place? They do so because of the same reasons we continue to sin. We are sinful by nature. Ezra asks, “will YHWH destroy us again, and fulfill his covenant promises through exiles brought back to the land from elsewhere?” Ezra knows that repentance must come soon—a window is open—and that repentance must be sincere.

This brings us to chapter 10, and verse 1, in which we witness the profound effect of Ezra’s personal act of mourning, and his prayer, have upon the watching Israelites. “*While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.*” Ezra did not preach a hellfire and brimstone sermon, he did not berate the people, he repented of his own sins (and not in such a way to call attention to himself), and then prayed for the nation. Those who assembled for the evening prayer were so moved by Ezra’s act of humiliation and his prayer, that the people living nearby came out

to join with him. They were convicted of their sins and many join with Ezra in weeping.¹

Here is a man who has led many of them on a four month journey across nine hundred miles of desert back to this place—which YHWH had chosen as his royal city and that place where his temple was to be built—only to tear his clothes and fall flat on his face before the Lord, trembling with fear that YHWH’s judgment might once again be poured out upon this disobedient people. Those who saw Ezra—men, women, and children joined him. They all wept bitterly. They knew the story well. YHWH brought judgment upon his disobedient people through the Babylonian army. The Babylonians destroyed everything—the city and its magnificent temple. They removed thousands of the people from their land, forcing them to endure seventy years in exile. But YHWH’s purposes will be accomplished. He keeps his word. YHWH has brought his people back to the land he promised them—this time through the beneficence of a wise but pagan Persian king. YHWH has even provided the means for the people to rebuild the temple, offer sacrifices, and then begin rebuilding the city.

And how did the Jews respond to YHWH’s gracious provision? They take pagan wives, they offer their daughters to pagan men, their sons take pagan wives, with some of the men even divorcing their own Jewish wives to marry pagan women. We know this to be the case because the prophet Malachi—who was active in Israel during this same period of time as Ezra’s discovery of the wide-spread practice of intermarriage between the Israelites and the Canaanites—warned Israel of YHWH’s judgment coming upon them because of this despicable practice. The degree of indifference and apathy to the law of God was shocking. According to Ezra’s account, it was the priests, Levites, and leading families, who were among the chief offenders.

In verses 2-4, we read of a man, particularly moved by Ezra’s example and prayer—Shecaniah. *“And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: ‘We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these 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. Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.’”* Shecaniah is one of those people with very small parts in the grand drama of redemption, and yet whose actions help change the course of redemptive history.²

For one thing, Shecaniah openly acknowledges Israel’s disobedience. *“We have broken faith.”* The remedy is to add concrete actions of repentance to the tears of mourning and trembling at the thought of God’s judgment. Shecaniah too believes God’s promise and tells Ezra, *“even now there is hope for Israel.”* There is something the people can do to make things right. The Israelites who are guilty of this sin can *“make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children.”* Shecaniah challenges Ezra to do this very thing, telling him Ezra, *“arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.”* Shecaniah is not only reminding Ezra that as the de facto leader of the group, Ezra is the one who should take the initiative and act, but also that should Ezra do so, the people now mourning the deplorable condition of Israel, will gladly join with Ezra to do a very difficult thing—put away these Canaanite wives and the children born to them.

¹ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 69-70.

² Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight).

The people must make a covenant with God, and then do the right thing—the genuine fruit of true repentance. According to verse 5, Ezra did that which Shecaniah challenged him to do. *“Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.”* The right thing is often not the easiest thing. But the right thing will always lead to God’s blessing, even if it seems as though the cost (in the short run) is far too high. Ezra does the right thing. So do the priests, Levites, and leading families. Formerly exiles, now back in their land, these people know what will happen to them, to their children, and to their children’s children if they fail to do the right thing. They know what it is like to live as exiles in a foreign land.

According to verse 6, after the people consent to make such a covenant, Ezra continues with his own mourning over the nation’s sin. *“Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.”* The covenant has been made, Ezra retreats into privacy, and continues to mourn—fasting and praying. This was genuine sorrow, not a matter for public spectacle. The chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, was probably located in the temple. Ezra’s action mirrors that of Moses after God gave Israel the law on Mount Sinai. We read in Exodus 34:27–28, *“and the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’ So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.”* In an act of repentance, the Israelites made a covenant before YHWH, and with profound echoes from the Exodus account, Ezra serves throughout as a second Moses.³

According to verses 7-14, a proclamation was made in Ezra’s name. Since Ezra was an official of the Persian court, the proclamation of such a decree carried with it the full legal authority of the Persian empire in addition to the biblical authority of Ezra’s leadership in calling for repentance on the part of the nation. We read,

And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said. But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.”

The scene is gloomy and foreboding—pointing to the threat of possible judgment of YHWH against his people lest they repent. Israel has a climate very similar to that of California—the rainy season falls late

³ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight).

in the year and when the people assembled in Jerusalem, it was cold and wet. We can date this assembly as meeting on December 19, 458 BC. The people tremble both from the chill as well as from the solemnity of the occasion.

The way in which the covenant will be enforced is now spelled out. The people of Israel are to assemble from the entire surrounding area. Failure to appear (v. 8) means immediate excommunication from the assembly of Israel, followed by banishment from the land—exile. While Ezra is the speaker, the order to assemble was given by the officials and elders. Ezra identifies the root cause of the people’s woes in verse 10. “*You have broken faith.*” This indicates that the people have sinned against God by disobeying his word in a callous and indifferent way. The appropriate act of repentance is clearly spelled out in verse 11. “*Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.*” Ezra’s mourning and tears are to be followed by concrete action.

The people do not deny the appropriateness of Ezra’s call to repent, but under the circumstances, a delay of implementation is in order. The people speak and offer a workable proposal—let the offenders appear before their elders, who will then deal with the offenders on a case by case basis. The wisdom of such discipline proceeding in a careful and systematic way is clearly modeled here. As good Presbyterians, the people acknowledge the right of the nation to discipline erring members, as well as the responsibility of their elders in dealing with these matters. Those who have taken Canaanite wives (who do not worship YHWH as proselytes) are to put away these wives and children (i.e., send them back to their Canaanite families)⁴ in order that “*the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.*” True repentance (in this case) requires that the Jews separate themselves from these pagans and their false religion, or else, face the judgment of God.

Divorce was allowed in Israel under certain narrow circumstances (as spelled out in Deuteronomy 24:1), and repeated in the New Testament—adultery and desertion. But as we know from Malachi 2:10-16, the Israelites had become so indifferent to the law of Moses, that a number of Jewish men divorced their wives without any biblical justification solely for the purpose of marrying pagan women. Malachi spoke the word of YHWH directly to these disobedient and faithless Israelites. “*For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.*” Jesus also gave these same narrow grounds for divorce and attributed divorce ultimately (even in those cases when there are biblical grounds) to the hardness of the human heart (Mark 10:5). Sadly, these improper marriages and divorces among the returning exiles fall into the category of scandalous sin during that time when Israel was called to be holy—that is, set apart for YHWH’s purposes of bringing forth his word and his Messiah. These marriages must be ended to protect the broader community of Israel from the wrath of God, and so that Israel might serve as a light to Gentiles.

There is some resistance to the covenant which requires that these women and their children be sent away. We read in verse 15, that “*only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.*” These men likely thought this was too harsh a solution. It is also likely that these men were among those who had taken Canaanite wives themselves. Edwin Yamauchi “points out that if Meshullam in verse 15 is the same as the

⁴ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 71.

Meshullam son of Bani in verse 29, then he himself had married a foreign wife.”⁵ This would explain why he would find this measure too harsh.

The process of ending these marriages began on the first day of the tenth month and ended on the first day of the first month (before the annual celebration of the Passover). According to verses 16-17. *“Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers’ houses, according to their fathers’ houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter; and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.”* This process lasted three months and ended on March 27, 457 BC. We also know from the list of names in the balance of the chapter (vv. 18-44) that there were 17 priests, 6 Levites, 1 singer, 3 gatekeepers, 84 others, for a total of 111. That this practice was wide-spread and pervasive among the leadership of Israel, (although the total number, 111, would constitute a very small percentage of the total population) certainly explains both Ezra’s reaction (mourning), as well as the radical measures required to demonstrate true repentance. How could people who endured seventy-years of exile be so indifferent to the law of God? Again, we know the reason all too well. We too are sinful and all of us have experienced knowing what God requires of us, and then doing the opposite. Paul describes this in Romans 7:14-21, and Galatians 5:16. Our sinful impulses will not cease until Christ returns or we die—whichever comes first.

Israel’s interaction with the neighboring people of the land, has been the source of trouble since the exiles first returned from Jerusalem in 538 BC. According to Ezra 4:2–3, the people of the land *“approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ houses and said to them, ‘Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.’ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers’ houses in Israel said to them, ‘You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.’”* Now in 458 BC the Jews have made such peace with the people of the land that they are intermarrying with them. At first the Jews resisted the temptation to allow the Canaanites to introduce their syncretism into Israel. Several generations later, many of the Jews have embraced the temptation to take pagan wives, and apart from Ezra’s bold actions, we can only wonder how far and fast Israel would fall again.

This question leads directly to our first point of application. We must always be on guard against the subtle temptation to give up on the demands Scripture makes upon us to keep ourselves separate from all forms of non-Christian religion. It is hard to believe things so different from the non-Christians around us. Yet, we remain in the world, while striving not to be of the world. We are God’s people and set apart for his purposes—therefore we are holy. Because we are set part by God and united to Jesus Christ through faith, we are to worship and serve him only. The historic situation Israel faced in the days of Ezra is vastly different from ours—even if the temptation to make peace with the non-Christians around us is just as real for us as it was for the returning exiles.

Israel was a holy theocracy—the act of intermarriage with pagans during this time in redemptive history posed a genuine threat to the holiness of that very nation which was to bring forth the Messiah, and the Savior of the world. Jesus was a biological descendent of David, and some of the names we’ve read in Ezra show up in Jesus’ genealogy in the gospels. The New Testament nowhere requires or advocates that Christians divorce their non-Christian spouses, even though the principle of separation remains in force.

⁵ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eight).

In 1 Corinthians 7:39, for example, Paul tells Christian widows that they are free to marry “only in the Lord.” Those who find themselves married to non-Christians are not commanded to divorce their spouses but to remain married to them (as in 1 Peter 3 or 1 Corinthians 7). But should the non-Christian spouse reject the Christian because of their faith in Jesus, they too are free to remarry, but only “in the Lord.” Like the Jews of Ezra’s days, unmarried Christians are free only to marry Christians and are not permitted to marry non-Christians.

Finally, we see in Ezra an example of true repentance. There is an awareness and acknowledgment of sin as a violation of God’s law. There is genuine sorrow arising from the knowledge that our sin offends the holy God. There is also an expression of faith in God’s goodness to his forgive sin (and Israel’s) and still accomplish his sovereign purposes for his people, who are holy (set apart unto him) and who are then to lives of obedience before him precisely because YHWH is merciful. Ezra reminds us that repentance begins with a change of mind (we have broken faith, we cannot continue to do so), but also includes making amends for the sin we have committed. In Israel’s case, this meant ending these unbiblical marriages and sending the Canaanite wives and any children of those unions back to their families. This was absolutely necessary in light of Israel’s situation while in the land of promise.

It is the apostle Paul who, in our New Testament lesson (Romans 2:4), reminds us that it is God’s kindness which leads us to repentance. The Apostle also tell us that if we do not trust in Christ’s death and righteousness to save us from our sins, then we will be judged by our works. If that happens, we are certain to perish. While the promise of God to save sinners who trust in his son (Jesus) is found in the gospel, the law of God exposes our sin, and confronts us with the demand to break off from our sins (just as Israel did in the days of Ezra). While we are not justified before God by our repentance, repentance is the fruit of that faith which looks to Jesus to save. Repentance requires that we make confession to the Lord that our sin deserves his punishment, and that we strive to break off from our sins because they offend the holy God. This is never easy, but it is always the right thing to do, and it flows out of God’s kindness toward us in Christ, who is our true Israel, and who will never cast us from the land of promise.