

THE FAITH-IN-ACTION PREACHER

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezekiel 18:25-32

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 9–10

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Ezra 10:1-12

I. Conviction of Sin

Ezra 10:1-4

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

1a. The sincerity of Ezra's distress over Judah's sins is emphasized by the intensifying verbs used to describe his actions (Nehemiah 1:3-6). Ezra's body and spirit were marked by brokenness and sorrow.

The house of God refers to the temple that had been rebuilt after Solomon's temple was destroyed in the Babylonian conquest.

1b. People of all ages need good leaders. When charting revivals in the Old Testament, movements toward God often started with one leader feeling a burden. Ezra's own conviction and contrition became an example for others to gather before the Lord and weep over their sins.

2a. *Shechaniah* is a descendant of David according to 1 Chronicles 3:1, 21-22. His father, *Jehiel*, was likely also the father of Obadiah, one of the returning exiles (Ezra 8:9). Jehiel is included in a grouping of those guilty of intermarriage. It is plausible that Shechaniah overcame personal and familial shame to speak up and not attempt to cover up his family's sin.

The Hebrew word translated *trespassed* denotes the violation of a covenant relationship or other expected behavior in the Old Testament. Marital unfaithfulness is a frequent analogy regarding Israel's relationship with God, with Israel being the adulterous wife.

The *strange wives* were those not part of the covenant people. Israel had been repeatedly warned that *the people of the land* of Canaan would lead them into apostasy. The sad example of Solomon—the wise king whose foreign wives “turned away his heart after other gods” (1 Kings 11:4)—should have stood as a grave warning in the time after the exile.

2b. A repentant heart makes *hope* possible

for right relations with God to be restored. The prophets often invoked past episodes of God's gracious deliverance in order to motivate the people toward obedience.

Hope is always grounded in the possibility of God's mercy. Hope exists because, as King David learned, God is "good, and doest good" (Psalm 119:68).

3a. *Now therefore* signals a step forward from the sins of the past and present, as defined in Ezra 10:2. This suggestion from Shechaniah is drastic and may appear cruel to modern readers. Some might wonder if God really wanted the men to *put away* their *wives* and children. But in the days following the return from Babylon, the people were very aware of how unfaithfulness had led to their removal from the promised land. Foreign women could very well lead their husbands back into idolatry. Thus the threat the foreign wives posed was too great to ignore. The people had to be intent on being holy in order to please God.

We should note that God's covenant people were not to mistreat non-Israelites who lived among them. But kindness isn't in the same category as intermarriage.

Shechaniah referred to Ezra deferentially as *my lord*. This acknowledged Ezra's authority to decide and lead the people based on what he believed was right.

Reverence and awe were given to God's words as if God himself were present. God helps those "poor and of a contrite spirit, [who] trembleth at [God's] word" (Isaiah 66:2).

3b. In view is *the law* that forbade certain marital unions. Notable law-breakers in this regard included Salmon (who married Rahab, a Canaanite) and Boaz (who married Ruth, a Moabite). These two women are honored as ancestors of Jesus himself (Joshua 2:1; Ruth 4:10; Matthew 1:5). But the captivity from which the Jews had returned was a vivid reminder of the dangers of idolatry. Maybe some non-

Jewish wives were exceptions to the rule, like Rahab and Ruth. But the law existed because such cases *were* exceptions, not the rule. And Rahab and Ruth professed allegiance to God in both word and action (Joshua 2:11; Ruth 1:16).

4. We can only imagine the overwhelmingly emotional toll of separating from one's wife and children. The difficulty of the demand is what brought forth the strong imperative *Arise*. This marks the beginning of the shift from conviction to action on the part of the leaders.

II. Call to Appear

Ezra 10:5-8

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

5. *Ezra* made sure that *the chief priests, the Levites and all Israel* were on the same page. So the leaders and lay people made a covenant with God to "put away all the wives, and such as are born of them" (Ezra 10:3).

6. *Ezra* withdrew to be alone in the dwelling of *Johanan*.

Ezra was overcome with his own grief regarding *the transgression*. His fast from *bread and drink* seems to have been spontaneous, a result of the pain in his spirit. Ezra reflected on years his people wasted as they chased false gods and denied the Lord.

7-8. *Three days* was a quick turnaround for a message to be proclaimed and journeys to be undertaken through all *Judah* and back to *Jerusalem*. But the speed with which repentance and action would happen throughout would indicate the importance the people put on rectifying their wrongs.

The consequences for not coming to Jerusalem also reveals the seriousness of the people's resolution. Forfeiting one's land and possessions and being cut off from *the congregation* would be the same treatment the foreign wives experienced. Those so penalized would have to find their homes elsewhere, away from God's people.

III. Call to Action

Ezra 10:9-12

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

9. Ten of the 12 tribes of Israel had been removed to Assyrian exile more than 180

years previous (2 Kings 17:6). So only the two tribes of *Judah and Benjamin*, having returned from Babylonian exile, remained to answer the call to come to *Jerusalem*.

The twentieth day of the ninth month corresponds to early December. *Rain* is normal at that point in the year. So in addition to the spiritual *trembling*, there was also physical shivering in the cold, heavy rain.

Distress to one's body, whether in the form of illness, injury, or mere discomfort, often goes hand in hand with spiritual distress. Sometimes one results in the other; at other times they seem to have independent causes, but the presence of both multiplies the misery. In such conditions *all the people sat* outside and waited.

10. Ezra's statement *increase the trespass of Israel* implies that the people hadn't learned the lesson of the exile. Instead of working to decrease sin, they were working for the opposite. So Ezra restated the charge.

11. *Confession* is the first response to conviction and necessary toward reconciliation with God. The next step is to follow through *and do [God's] pleasure*, that is, what He commanded in the first place, what He has desired all along.

To be required to separate *from the strange wives* was not necessarily a judgment on any specific conduct on the wives' part since no such conduct is listed. Instead, those wives were assumed to retain the priorities and religious practices of *the people of the land* among whom they had grown up. Only by severing their influence could the men of Judah and Benjamin be certain that the wives wouldn't tempt them to idolatry.

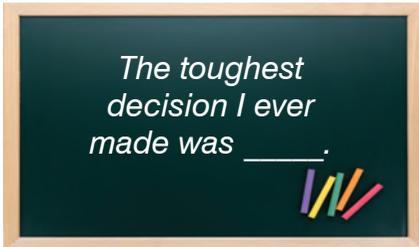
12. Concluding this part of the text is the *loud voice* of a unified people who experienced conviction of sin. Ezra's leadership helped foster that commitment. Any spiritual leader worth following will always direct people to God and His glory only.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

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Into the Lesson

Complete this sentence:



Into the Word

Read Ezra 9 and complete the following statements.

What Ezra felt: _____

Advice Ezra received: _____

What Ezra demanded: _____

How people responded: _____

Consider how does today's passage illustrate the following statements.

- Sin cannot be excused.
- God will restore those who repent.
- Sin results in suffering.
- Recognizing sin for what it is vital for restoring relationship with God.
 - Sin among God's people must be addressed, even by those not personally guilty of the sin at issue.
 - One person who mourns sin can lead a whole nation to repent.
 - God does not take sin lightly.

What might have happened . . .

- if Ezra had condemned the people without naming himself among the nation that had failed?
- if Shechaniah had tried to minimize the seriousness of the people's sin?
- if Ezra had chosen a less severe remedy for the sinful intermarriages?
- if the leading priests and Levites had failed to take the oath Ezra demanded?
- if Ezra had experienced only disappointment or disgust instead of agony at the unfaithfulness?

Into Life

Write down one personal sin you have avoided confronting, and an action to repent and remove the sin.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Action is the hallmark of true conviction.