



## **“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”**

### **Session 5: People Rebuilding and Confession**

**July 18, 2024**

**6:30 PM**

#### **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, we pray that You would help us to be sensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit this evening. Help us to learn from the example of Ezra, to repent of sin quickly and never let it take root in our lives. Teach us through Your Word this evening to release our guilt to You and to forgive ourselves so we may not live in the bondage of our failures. May we always be thankful for Your mercy and grace. AMEN.*

#### **Session 4 Recap**

Last week in Session 4, we looked at Chapters 7 and 8 where the book of Ezra moves forward approximately 60 years to focus on the second returning group, this group led by Ezra. There is a new Persian King, King Artaxerxes I, but there is the same pattern of God’s sovereign direction of the king to bless and prosper the returning remnant to Jerusalem. Chapters 7 and 8 mirror the process or preparation we saw in Ezra chapters 1 and 2. Now, it is Ezra sent by the King, this time not to rebuild the Temple but to teach the “laws of the land” – rebuilding the community.

#### **Opening Question...**

Think of a time when you experienced relief from a burden of guilt. What was the situation? What changed in your life as a result of the experience?

## **Ezra Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 Overview**

As Ezra prepares to lead the Jewish exiles back to Judah and arrives in Jerusalem, he becomes aware of another problem – a spiritual problem – that he must address. Many of the Jewish people had taken foreign spouses – sinful practices that had led the nation into captivity in the first place. The issue was not “intermarriage” but religious defilement – five of the nations mentioned were the nations that Joshua was supposed to have driven out when they first entered the Promised Land, while the others had been especially hateful to the nation of Judah. Ezra is stunned by the news and he gathers the people together to address the situation through a prayer of confession. As Ezra corporately confesses to God, the people all gathered around him and began to weep. They promise they will make amends to put themselves back in line with God. When Ezra hears this response, he leads the people in making the reforms.

### **Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 9 (verses 1 – 15)**

**Vs. 1 – 2** – Since the time of the judges, Israelite men had married pagan women and then adopted their religious practices. Even Israel’s great King Solomon was guilty of this sin. Although this practice was forbidden in God’s Law (Exodus 34, Deuteronomy 7), it happened in Ezra’s day and again only a generation after him during Nehemiah’s day. Opposition to “mixed marriages” was NOT racial prejudice, because both Jews and non-Jews of this area were of the same Semitic background. The reasons were strictly SPIRITUAL. A person who married a pagan was inclined to adopt the person’s pagan beliefs and practices. (This is what occurred under King Solomon and his “many wives”. They introduced their multiple religious practices and helped corrupt the kingdom.) If the Israelites were insensitive enough to disobey God in something as important as marriage, they would not be strong enough to stand firm against their spouses’ idolatry. Until the Israelites finally stopped this practice, idolatry remained a constant problem.

Often time intermarriage in the ancient world was usually about forming alliances. The people of Israel were few in number and poor, and it made sense (from a worldly perspective) to enhance their fortunes by marrying foreign women. King Solomon followed this practice. So, the women and

children involved were likely being used for personal gain rather than being in a proper, caring marriage.

**Vs. 3 – 4** – Tearing one’s clothes or pulling hair from one’s head or beard were signs of self-abasement or humility. They expressed sorrow for sin. Artaxerxes had invested Ezra with the legal power to punish transgressors of God’s law with fines, imprisonment, or even death. Yet Ezra’s immediate response was not to discipline the guilty and hand out heavy punishments, but to lament his people’s unfaithfulness to God. Ezra’s primary role among the people was to be their priest. So he acted as a priest.

**Vs. 5 – 15** – After learning about the sins of the people, Ezra fell to his knees in prayer. His heartfelt prayer provides a good perspective on sin. He recognized: (1) that sin is serious; (2) that no one sins without affecting others; (3) that he was not sinless, although he did not have a pagan wife; and (4) that God’s love and mercy had spared the nation when they did nothing to deserve it. It is easy to view sin lightly in a world that sees sin as inconsequential, but we should view sin as seriously as Ezra did.

Ezra’s prayer confessed the sins of the people. Although he had not sinned in the way the people had, he identified with their sins. With weeping, he expressed shame for sin, fear of the consequences, and desire that the people would come to their senses and repent. His prayer moved the people to tears. Ezra demonstrated the need for a holy community around the rebuilt Temple. We need a holy community in churches today as well. Even when we sin in the worst imaginable way, we can turn to God with prayers of repentance.

Ezra recognized that if God gave the people the justice they deserved, they would not be able to stand before Him. Often we cry out for justice when we feel abused and unfairly treated. In those moments, we forget the reality of our own sin and the righteous judgment we deserve. How fortunate we are that God gives us mercy and grace rather than only justice. The next time you ask God for fair and just treatment, pause to think what would happen if God gave you what you really deserve. Plead instead for His mercy.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

1. Why did the Jewish leaders feel compelled to bring their problem to Ezra's attention?
2. Why did Ezra include himself in his prayer of repentance – even though he (and many others) had remained faithful to God?
3. What are some ways that you tend to handle guilt and shame? What does the example of Ezra reveal about the correct way to handle your guilt?
4. Why is it often tempting to ignore a guilty conscience?
5. What role does lament over sin have in your life, or in the life of our church? How might you do more of it, and why might that be helpful in your relationship with God?

### **Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 10 (verses 1 – 44)**

**Vs. 1 – 3** – Why were the men commanded to send away their wives and children? Although the measure was extreme, intermarriage to pagans was strictly forbidden according to the Mosaic law – and even the priests and Levites had intermarried. Although a severe solution, it only involved 113 of the approximately 29,000 families. Ezra's strong act, though very difficult for some, was necessary to preserve Israel as a nation committed to God. Some of the exiles of the northern kingdom of Israel had lost both their spiritual and physical identity through intermarriage. Their pagan spouses had led the people and families to worship idols. Ezra did not want this to happen to the southern kingdom of Judah.

**Vs. 4 – 17** – Following Ezra's earnest prayer, the people confessed their sin to God. Then they asked for direction in restoring their relationship with God. True repentance does not end with words of confession – that would be mere lip service. It must lead to corrected behavior and changed attitudes. When you sin and are truly sorry, confess this to God, ask His forgiveness, and accept His grace and mercy. Then, as an act of thankfulness for your forgiveness, make the needed corrections.

In verse 8, the assembly laid out circumstances for those who did not follow the stated plan for the people. To forfeit one's property meant to be disinherited – to lose one's legal right to own land. This was to ensure that no pagan children would inherit Israel's land. In addition, the person who refused to come to Jerusalem would be expelled from the assembly of the exiles and not allowed to worship in the Temple. The Jews considered this a horrible punishment.

As believers in Christ, all our sins are forgiven. His death cleansed us from all sin. Why do we then still confess our sins? Confession is more than appropriating Christ's forgiveness for what we have done wrong, and we do not have to confess again sins that were previously confessed. Confession is agreeing with God that our thoughts, words, and actions are wrong and contrary to His will. It is recommitting ourselves to do His will and to renounce any acts of disobedience. Confession is turning away from sin and asking God for fresh power to live for Him.

**Vs. 18 – 44** – The book of Ezra opens with God's Temple in ruins and the people of Judah captive in Babylon. Ezra tells of the return of God's people, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the restoration of the sacrificial worship system. Similarly, God is able to restore and rebuild the lives of people today. No one is so far away from God that he or she cannot be restored. Repentance is all that is required. No matter how far we have strayed or how long it has been since we have worshiped God, He is able to restore our relationship to Him and rebuild our lives.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

1. How did Ezra serve as a good example in helping the people realize the gravity of their sin?
2. In what ways did the people demonstrate they were truly sorry for their sins? What steps did they take to restore their relationship with God?
3. What are some of the things that tend to get in the way of believers confessing their sins?

4. In what ways can unconfessed sin affect a person's relationship with God and others?

### **One Additional Note...**

Ezra's prayer focused on confession. Like Ezra, confession may not only be about sin but also confessing truths about God's holiness and His Fatherly love for you. Use these six when you approach your "confession" to God:

1. **Confess God's holiness** – Begin by acknowledging the sacred beauty of the God you are privileged to approach in prayer, through Jesus.
2. **Confess your sin** – Be honest with God about your wrongdoing.
3. **Confess your sorrows** – Lament not just the effects of your own sin, but also how sin and brokenness around you have harmed or troubled you. Be honest with God about your hurts.
4. **Confess God's goodness in salvation** – Praise your God for all His wondrous works.
5. **Confess God's goodness in your life** – Praise your God for His generosity toward you.
6. **Finally, ask for God's help.** – Asking your Father for good gifts is a fundamental part of prayer, so even though Ezra did not record any requests in his prayer, go ahead and tell your desires to God.

### **Closing Prayer**

*Father, we are unworthy to stand in your presence, yet through the blood of your Son we come to you for mercy. Remind us of the importance of repentance. Give us strength through your Holy Spirit to turn away from our sin. Show us how to deepen our relationship with You. Amen.*

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**“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”**

**Session 6 – A Third Return by God’s Good Hand**

**\*Thursday, July 25      6:30 PM**

**Nehemiah Ch. 1 & 2**

**Facebook Live**

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