

Ezra: Faith and Action Preacher

Bible Background • EZRA 9-10

Printed Text • EZRA 10:1–12 | Devotional Reading • EZEKIEL 18:25–32

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will CONTRAST the people’s need for repentance with their joyful response to God’s word, BELIEVE that God’s truth is eternal, and GROW in determination to serve God in our community and beyond.

In Focus

The official board of First Church called a congregational meeting to discuss the church’s constitution. The constitution was written 150 years ago and did not reflect the changing racial structure of the community that the church served. Deacon Robinson, the moderator, called the meeting to order. He explained to the congregation that the church’s constitution had to be reformed if First Church was to survive. Some of the older members were concerned that changing the constitution would mean changing the purpose and character of First Church. However, what was really at stake was the way the church would do ministry in the 21st century. At one point, old Mr. Johnson stood to speak, “I am the longest attending member of this church. I have been here through three pastors. Change can be a scary word for some people. We are creatures of habit, so it is difficult for some of us to accept changes, whether in our worship style or our personal lives. Certainly one of the most frightening times in our lives is when we move to a new apartment or take on a new job. But I have stayed here through many changes, and I can tell you, they have for the most part, been good ones. This church has a good heart, and we want to follow God. His rules aren’t going to change. So maybe ours should.” After three hours of intense discussion and mixed emotions, the congregation gave the board the okay to proceed with rewriting the constitution.

This week we will study God’s call through Ezra for the nation Israel to change their lives through religious and moral reform. What are some ways God is guiding you to better walk in obedience to His will?

Keep in Mind

“Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: ‘You have committed a terrible sin... You have increased Israel’s guilt. So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land’” (from Ezra 10:10–11, NLT)

Words You Should Know

- A. **Taken [a wife]** (Ezra 10:2) *yashab* (Heb.) — To dwell, or inhabit; to cause to inhabit or cohabit
- B. **Put away (v. 3) yatsa’** (Heb.) — To go forth; to cause to go forth

Say It Correctly

Zerubbabel. zeh-ROO-bah-bell.

Shechaniah. sheh-KAH-nee-uh.

Jehiel. JEH-hee-ell.

Elam. EE-lam.

Artaxerxes. ar-tah-ZERK-sees.

Jehohanan. jeh-HOE-ha-non.

Eliashib.

Kislev. KEES-lev.

KJV

Ezra 10:1 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.

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.

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.

NLT

Ezra 10:1 While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him.

2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel.

3 Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God.

4 Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

5 So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath.

6 Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

7 Then a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles should come to Jerusalem.

8 Those who failed to come within three days would, if the leaders and elders so decided, forfeit all their property and be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

9 Within three days, all the people of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. This took place on December 19, and all the people were sitting in the square before the Temple of God. They were trembling both because of the seriousness of the matter and because it was raining.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: “You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel’s guilt.

11 So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women.”

12 Then the whole assembly raised their voices and answered, “Yes, you are right; we must do as you say!”

The People, Places, and Times

Mourning. The ancient Hebrews placed a greater emphasis on external, symbolic acts of mourning than modern Western people do. Upon receipt of bad news or in the presence of sudden calamity it was customary to rend the clothes (2 Samuel 1:2) and to sprinkle dirt or ashes upon the head (Joshua 7:6). Hair cloth, which is scratchy and cheap, was adopted as clothing (Isaiah 22:12). Covering the head or lips also indicated mourning (Jeremiah 13:3; Ezekiel 24:17, 22). A death in the household set in motion an elaborate ceremony of mourning which lasted a week or more. Family members and their friends gathered around the corpse and indulged in lamentations bordering on hysteria. Professional mourners were often called in for a funeral (Jeremiah 9:17–22; Amos 5:16; Matthew 9:23). In earlier times these were probably to protect the living from the spirits of the departed, who were greatly feared. By Bible times, however, the professional mourning women were used merely as another manifestation of grief for the departed.

How do you make space to mourn? Why is mourning necessary?

Background

For decades, God sent many prophets to warn Israel and Judah that their disobedience and lack of repentance would ultimately lead to their destruction. These prophecies were fulfilled when Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC, followed by Judah’s fall in 586 BC at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It was then that the Temple was destroyed. However, the Lord did not leave them without hope, promising the return of a remnant of the people, and rebuilding of the Temple (Jeremiah 27:22). This fulfillment began in 538 BC when Zerubbabel led the first group to Jerusalem to start rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1–6). The priest, Ezra, led a second group’s return. Both returns were authorized and aided by unlikely sources—the kings of Persia, who had conquered Babylon. In this passage, we see Ezra addressing the people who appear to be heading down a similar sinful path as their forefathers. His focus becomes to lead the people to not only a physical return but a spiritual return of their hearts toward the one true God.

Where do you see God at work in your life calling you back to Him and rebuilding your faith?

At-A-Glance

1. The Proposal (Ezra 10:1-4)
2. The Oath (vv. 5-6)
3. The Proclamation (vv. 7-8)
4. The Affirmation (vv. 9-12)

In Depth

1. The Proposal (Ezra 10:1–4) In chapter 9, several leaders brought to Ezra’s attention that some of the men had married pagan women and reproduced with them. Ezra’s response was one of lament. God had faithfully

delivered them from the seventy years in exile as promised, and here they were, seemingly determined to return to the evil that led to their destruction.

As was ancient Jewish custom, Ezra tore his clothes, then plucked the hair from his head and beard, fasted, prayed, confessed, and wept loudly as a public expression of his grief and astonishment.

Such a public outcry compelled others to join him. Shechaniah was moved to publicly confess, on behalf of the community, a sin that he did not commit (his name is not on the list in 10:18–43). It is possible, however, that his disdain and grief were still personal, as he may have been related to one of the offenders. He is identified as the “son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam,” and there is a Jehiel listed among the sons of Elam who defied God’s law. Shechaniah’s response was filled with hope, support, and admonishment as he proposed a covenant with the Lord—the utmost binding form of commitment. His solution to send away those wives who still worshiped pagan gods, along with their children, was a difficult one to execute but revealed his commitment to holiness, and the law of God.

2. The Oath (vv. 5–6) Shechaniah’s admonition, “Be of good courage, and do it,” was reminiscent of God’s command to Joshua as he prepared to lead Israel into the promised land after forty years of wandering, due to their fathers’ lack of faith (Joshua 1:6). Generations later, Ezra was now tasked with spiritually leading a remnant of exiled Jews back to the Lord. His call of repentance meant all of Israel would have to swear to keep their promise, under the threat of severe punishment. Twice it is mentioned he “arose,” indicating Ezra continued to bow before the Lord in mourning.

Even after Israel swore an oath, he did not celebrate—he returned to the room of the high priest’s grandson to resume fasting and mourning because of “the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles” (NLT). This is the way in our lives too sometimes. Even after we realize our mistake and determine to correct it, the guilt and shame of the mistake still need to be atoned for.

3. The Proclamation (vv. 7–8) Each decision led to another with a broader scope. Shechaniah’s proposal to Ezra led to the oath taken by the leaders and those gathered locally. Now a proclamation was sent requiring all of the returned exiles in Judah to come to Jerusalem. A timeline of three days was given as those furthest away from Jerusalem would be no more than 50 miles away—or three days’ journey. Failure to come would lead to expulsion and confiscation of property, essentially a stripping away of legal rights. Ezra was granted this authority by King Artaxerxes (7:25–26). Ezra knows giving up a wife and her children is a major decision, and some would hesitate to do it. He is insistent on faithfully keeping God’s law, though. If these men do not agree to keep the entire law, they will not be permitted to remain under that law. They will be excluded from the community (by being separated from the congregation) and from the inheritance (by forfeiting their property, especially their land).

4. The Affirmation (vv. 9–12) As commanded, the people gathered after three days, despite the cold December weather. Ezra records the day as “the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month” (v. 9). This is Kislev 20 on the Jewish calendar, which begins in the spring, placing their ninth month in the winter, rather than the fall. Because the Jewish calendar is lunar, dates sometimes vary from year to year compared to the common Western solar calendar. However, since we can pin Ezra’s account to a specific year in King Cyrus’ reign, scholars can calculate the date of this particular Kislev 20 as December 19 on our Gregorian calendar (see NLT, v. 9).

The combination of the fear of God’s wrath, and being drenched and cold caused them to tremble. Under these circumstances, Ezra boldly confronted their unfaithfulness and called for their confession and action. The whole assembly agreed. Since it was rainy season (November-March) and the assembly was rather large, it would take three months for all marriages to be investigated. In the end, 113 men (including several priests and Levites) were found guilty of ungodly marriages (vv. 18–43).

Search the Scriptures

1. When did God first forbid Israelites to intermarry and why (Deuteronomy 7:1–6)?
2. Whose idea is it to divorce pagan wives and send them away (Ezra 10:3)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Use the Focus Scriptures to point out words that describe Obadiah and Elijah. Contrast the two men.
2. In what ways were both men instruments in the hand of God?

Liberating Lesson

It is tempting to judge Israel when reading about their cycle of sin, judgment, and repentance. They never quite seem to get it right. Israel's story is our story. Like Israel, we do not sin in isolation; the actions of a few can have dire consequences for the masses. Like Israel, we may often find ourselves in a constant cycle of sin. However, our individualistic approach to holiness hinders us. Our pride prevents us from publicly confessing our sin to one another, therefore, rarely do we see examples of a body or individual willingly confessing the sins of others. Yet Scripture shows that such actions please God, often bringing Israel to a place of healing, true repentance, and restoration.

Application for Activation

When confronted with the magnitude of their sin, the returned exiles took repentance seriously, even though the corrective action would be costly. They had tasted God's faithfulness. He kept His promise to allow them to return. Their reasonable act of service would be to worship the one true God. Consider your own life. Where have you seen God's faithfulness, grace, and mercy? What sin has He revealed to you lately that requires your attention and repentance? What will the corrective action cost you? Spend time in prayer—mourning, bowing, worshipping, fasting if necessary. Then, "Get up, be strong and take action."

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

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.

After the return from exile, Ezra made two significant reforms: the reading of the law in Nehemiah 7-10 and the resolution of mixed marriages in this passage. Informed by the leaders about the issue of marriage with foreign wives, Ezra is in great distress for the sin of people and he expresses his complete displeasure on the matter by a fast (9:1–3). During evening sacrifice time which is around 3 p.m., he falls prostrate and delivers a prayer of confession in front of the Temple for all to see. And indeed, his posture brings the whole community (men, women, and children) around to witness what was going on.

Ezra's act of contrition is portrayed by four elements: prayer, confession, weeping, and throwing himself to the ground. The weeping shows Ezra's contrition for the nation's sin, and by throwing himself on the ground, he showed his abject humility before God. Stirred by the example of humility and contrition of Ezra, the crowd also joins in weeping. They weep even more deeply than Ezra. Ezra's example leads them to realize the seriousness of the sin they have committed. Confession is the first step toward reconciliation with God after a sin is committed. Ezra could confess the sin of the people but a more precise decision needed to be taken to demonstrate to God that the remorse of the people is sincere.

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.

There is not much background information on Shecaniah, because there are six different individuals with this name mentioned in Ezra—Nehemiah. It is possible either he or his father was married to a foreign woman, in which case, his role as spokesman is understandable because he would have an interest to the resolution of the case. His speech was to acknowledge the sin of the people, which was mixed marriage. The unfaithfulness of the people to God is expressed in terms of breaking an oath. The word used for marriage in this context is *yashab* (Heb. yaw-SHAB) is not the normal Hebrew word for marriage (*chathan*, khaw-THAN). It means that these marriages were not legally and religiously valid. This is a further indication of the unlawfulness in which the people find themselves. The Law of Moses forbade mixed marriages (Deuteronomy 7:1–4) to prevent the moral and spiritual corruption of the covenant nation.

The ban on marriages with foreign women was not on racial basis, as clearly attested by the Bible with the story of the mixed multitudes in Exodus who left Egypt with the Israelites (Exodus 12:38) or in the story of Rahab who forsook her people and their gods for the God of Israel (Joshua 2) and Ruth the Moabite who married with Boaz (Ruth 1:16; 4). The ban was not therefore on interracial marriage but on interreligious marriage with its obvious danger of drifting the heart of God's people away from God to worship pagan gods like in the case of Solomon. The phrase "married the daughter of a strange god" (Malachi 2:11) can imply the adoption of all or part of the pagan religion as a result of such marriages.

The sin was too serious for a remnant that had just come out of the exile caused by continuous disobedience to the Law. The atmosphere was that of despair with Ezra completely afflicted by the sin and the people's awareness of their trespass. What should be expected in this kind of situation is a heaviness in the hearts and a somber prospect of the future. However, Shecaniah, in spite of the seriousness of the issue, has confidence that there is still hope. The Hebrew word translated "hope" is found only five times in the Old Testament. Apart from this verse, it is found once in 1 Chronicles 29:15 and three times in Jeremiah (14:8; 17:13; 50:7). In this case, it suggests that all is not lost for the people. There is still a glimpse of light. When things do not seem to move in the direction we expect, we can trust God, for He is our hope. No situation is really hopeless because we can amend our ways and God will always bring restoration. Jeremiah finds hope in the mercies of God that are renewed every morning (Lamentations 3:22–24). In the depth of their fall, hope, and restoration are found in repentance, which consists not only in a confession of sin but also in reparation of the wrong.

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.

Shecaniah proceeds to give concrete actions that should be initiated to restore the people. First, the people have to resolve to separate themselves from their pagan wives and their children. The move may seem too rigid, but there were too many Israelite women abandoned for the foreign ones. Malachi also deals with the same evils mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah (Malachi 2:13–14). The inference is that the interreligious marriages were made at the expense of the divorce from Israelite women. The reproach of divorcing their lawfully wedded

wives is preceded by the reproach of marrying foreign women. The religious influence of the pagan wives on their children would be a stumbling block for preserving the purity of the religion of the Lord.

The decision to dismiss the pagan wives requires a covenant. Yahweh is a covenant-keeping God who never breaks His covenant with His people. Every altering of the covenant comes from people because His faithfulness endures forever. The covenant was formalized by an oath or a gesture performed by the parties involved. This instance is rather a renewal of the covenant that the people themselves have broken. The word used for divorce, *yatsa'* (yaw- TSAW), is not the normal Hebrew term for divorce, (*kerithuth*, ker-ee-THOOT). It means that religiously there was nothing wrong with sending these women away. The men made no religious covenant with these women "till death do us part," as we do today. The God who dislikes divorce in Malachi 2:16 (cf. Matthew 19:16; Mark 10:9) would not have ordered them to divorce from these women were they lawfully married. Shecaniah, as a spokesperson, engages the whole assembly in respecting the instruction of Ezra and those he will appoint to sort the matter out. They will pledge to keep the law of God.

Second, Shecaniah calls on Ezra to also take his responsibility and lead the people to correct the wrong they have done. Ezra's sadness over the case is also due to the involvement of even some members of the priesthood. Ezra needed a strong backing and Shecaniah's words were timely and appropriate. Now that the people recognize their sin, the procedure to repair and move to restoration was now contemplated. Ezra the leader who is divinely endowed with leadership, vision, and a scholar's understanding of the law has to indicate the way forward. He is assured of the full cooperation of the entire assembly.

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.

Without delay, Ezra indicates the first thing to be done. He invites the leaders representing the entire assembly to take an oath to confirm that they will do as they have promised. All the leaders take the oath on behalf of the group they represent. All these things are conducted in a consensual manner bringing everyone on board. Now there is a binding covenant on the whole community to act according to their own decision. After Ezra gets assurance that the people will proceed as they promise, he leaves the spot and goes to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib to continue with his fast. This room is probably in the Temple where there were rooms for priests. Ezra himself being a priest, so it is lawful for him to stay there.

Ezra extends his fast because the matter is so serious. Though he was assured by the leaders' oath taken that they were ready to make their ways straight with the Lord, he still needs to continue to mourn because of the unfaithfulness. What is not clear is the length of his fast, whether it was just for the night or up to the three days appointed to gather the people.

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.

To complete the process of repentance, a gathering is called within three days for all the returnees from exile to come to Jerusalem. This gathering unlike the previous one is not spontaneous but a well-planned formal meeting. These three days were probably necessary so that people from cities far from Jerusalem needed to make the journey. In case some decided not to come, they were exposed to the confiscation of their property and ex-communication from the assembly. The confiscated properties might have been sent to the Temple treasury (Joshua 6:19, 24).

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.

The assembly takes place on the twentieth day of the ninth month also known as the month of Kislev, which is the third week of December during the middle of the rainy season. The gathering takes place in the square before the Temple of God. People are exposed to physical and emotional challenges. They assemble under heavy rain in a cold season. It is an indication of the gravity of the matter they are dealing with. There is no possibility of postponement considering the urgency of the matter. Emotionally, they are faced with the prospect of separation from people with whom they built up an emotional bond.

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.

Ezra with the authority of the priesthood stands during the gathering to solemnly declare to the people their sin. He designates the sin in clear terms and stresses the gravity of it. The people have brought more condemnation on themselves than previously. The sense is not that they have committed a greater sin but that their guilt is now higher than before because they have witnessed how God deals with unfaithfulness. They are just back from exile, and it seems they did not learn the lesson taught by these years far from their land. Ezra calls on the assembly to confess their sin to the Lord, “the God of your ancestors.” This reminds them of two things: The God of their ancestors is a just and holy one who will not tolerate sin as He did not with their ancestors, but He is also a God of mercy and longsuffering ever ready to forgive those who will come to Him in humility pleading for His mercies. It is therefore important to come back to Him for restoration that generates hope for His presence, guidance, and assistance. The confession will not be complete until action is taken to repair the wrong that has been done to God. As suggested above by Shecaniah, Ezra reiterates the call to get rid of the foreign wives. Though religiously, it was expected to send these women away, socially it had to be done wisely to avoid creating a social crisis. The dismissed women and their children would go back to their families. In unison, the whole assembly agreed to do as recommended by Ezra.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

A Light to Jews and Gentiles
(Acts 26:19–23)

TUESDAY

Live the New Life in Christ
(Ephesians 4:17–24)

WEDNESDAY

Keep Land Faithful to Godly Practices
(Leviticus 18:24–30)

THURSDAY

Ignoring God's Laws Leads to Judgment
(Zechariah 7:8–14)

FRIDAY

People Anxious to Hear the Law
(Nehemiah 7:73–8:6)

SATURDAY

People Respond Actively to the Law
(Nehemiah 8:9–12)

SUNDAY

Committed to a Life of Obedience
(Ezra 10:1–12)