

# “The Power of Confession”

Ezra 10:1-44

BRIEF REVIEW...

You can be turning to Ezra 10. Wow! It's hard to believe that we've already reached the final message in our Ezra series. Just to remind you of where we've been...

After the nation of Israel had been in exile for 70 years, the Persian King Cyrus made a decree for them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple just as Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied. Zerubbabel led the first wave of returning exiles home to Jerusalem, and in spite of opposition from without and complacency from within, the nation succeeded in rebuilding the Temple.

58 years later, Ezra and the second wave of returning exiles made it to Jerusalem to find that the people were once again intermarrying with the surrounding PAGAN nations. This was the very sin that resulted in their exile, and as Dale showed us last week, this sin had permeated all levels of leadership. This literally FLOORED Ezra, and he said...

**Ezra 9:5-6**

**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, 6 saying:**

**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.**

“I can't even bring myself to look at You. You brought us home, and we've returned to doing the very things for which You tore us from it 120 years ago!!!”

Ezra was BROKEN over sin that WASN'T EVEN HIS, and his brokenness, as well see, became CONTAGIOUS.

We'll pick up in verse one...

**Ezra 10:1-3**

**1 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. 2 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. 3 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.**

As Ezra's confession, prayers, and weeping continued, more people of Israel gathered around him. Who were these people?

It's hard to say. Ezra's continued use of "WE" (much like Moses) in confessing the sins of the Nation (that weren't his own sins) makes it difficult to tell, but I'll point this out. In chapter nine it says...

**Ezra 9:4**

**Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.**

Then in chapter ten it says...

**Ezra 10:3**

**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.**

This seemingly indicates that the original group that gathered around Ezra in chapter nine and the group we see gathered in chapter ten are DIFFERENT, and that the former group who **"trembled at the words of the God of Israel"** had possibly spoken out about these marriages. See the phrase **"according to counsel of my lord AND OF THOSE WHO TREMBLE AT THE COMMANDMENT OF OUR GOD?"** It seems these who feared God had been vocal about the sin but with little effect.

If this observation is accurate, then that means that, Shecaniah, the spokesman who arose, was of the group who had participated in these intermarriages. THAT'S EXCITING!

THAT MEANS that the brokenness of those who initially spoke out against this sin in Israel combined with Ezra's brokenness had begun to CONVICT the wrongdoers, and, starting with Shecaniah, led to REPENTANCE and CONFESSION.

So, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR US? We're to be like those who "tremble at the commandment of our God," GRACIOUSLY CONTINUING TO CONFRONT SIN WITH TRUTH! Grace and Truth must always meet. That's why Jesus' ministry on earth was so powerful; He was full of GRACE and TRUTH!

I think of how we see social media posts on everything from how someone's feeling to what they're eating to who they're dating, to thoughts on current events, and if they're someone we care about, what do we do?

LIKE! HEART! If they're feeling bad, we hit the CARES emoji. What about when it's someone we love celebrating something that's sinful according to scripture?

"They ought to know better than that. I can't bring myself to LIKE that." So, what do we do? We go SILENT.

We make over all the other posts:

Feeling Italian tonight. Chicken alfredo, salad, and garlic bread. "Looks yummy! [Drooling emoji]"

They post a pic of their new puppy and a huge mess with the caption: Came home to this today. "Oh, but how could you stay mad at that adorable thing!"

They post the obligatory "I'm in a new relationship" post, but it's with someone of the same sex.

[Stand at attention in SILENCE]

They post a beautiful pic they took while out on a recent hike (photoshopped, of course).

[AH! Now I can come back to life!] "That's GORGEOUS! Where was that shot taken?"

Ezra let his brokenness SHOW! Now, am I saying that you should stalk everyone's social media posts looking to start a debate on their wall? NO, but might we prayerfully go to them privately and lovingly confront them with TRUTH?

If these folks who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" hadn't spoken up, who knows if a Shecaniah would've ever stepped up and led out in this revival?

Your regular and ready response to sin matters.

#### **Ezra 10:4**

**“Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.”**

Does anyone else hear that and think, “Whoa! Wait a minute. You all BLEW IT, and now this is Ezra’s problem to fix?!”

But it was, wasn’t it? Think about it. What was Ezra's mission? Teach the Law of God in the Land, right? What is the Word of God is good for?

#### **2 Timothy 3:16-17**

**16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**

The Word of God CONFRONTS us where we are.

Perhaps Ezra didn’t consider at the outset that things back home could be this bad, but whether he realized it or not, this was the mission. This was always the mission. The purpose of God’s Word is to help us know Him and bring our lives into conformity with His will.

That’s why the people could say that it was his task.

They chose Ezra to lead because (1) they needed to be led and (2) they needed to be led toward God.

Leaders challenge us to do hard things, to do things we wouldn't have done on our own. Their job isn't to make you comfortable. In fact, it's their job to make you uncomfortable.

I think of the cross country and track coaches I had in high school. Back then, there were times when I felt they were just devising new methods of torture! But it was their training regimens that shaved seconds and eventually minutes off my race times. They didn't just let me do what I wanted to do; they made me do what was necessary. That's the job of a leader.

Sadly, we have "Christian" leaders even within our own denomination who are failing to lead. Instead, because cultural wokeness is paramount, they now yield to the ones they're meant to lead.

At one time they would have said, "THIS WAY is God's will! Let's go THIS WAY!"

Over time, however, they've observed those following them balking at their leadership. In essence, they've started saying, "Oh, you don't want to go this way? Okay. Can we go *that way*? Great. Let's go that way."

You see, unlike Ezra and many in the congregation of Israel, many so-called "Christian leaders" don't "**tremble at the commandment of our God;**" they tremble at the power of the "thought police" and the perception of the culture at large, and they're taking more and more steps away from the Word of God.

So, who are you following, and what motivates their actions and message? Do they leave you feeling comfortable, or do they challenge you? I love something my sister-in-law told me once about Mt. Pleasant. She and my brother live in Charlotte, and she began feeling like they needed to switch churches. She said that she always left church feeling good. You know, good with herself. When they've been up to visit and they come to church here, she said she leaves feeling challenged. She sees areas where she's not okay, and she's motivated to let God change her. I praise the Lord for that.

Make sure the people you're following are CHALLENGE you, and that they challenge you to MOVE CLOSER to God, not further away or deeper into yourself.

Shecaniah and the rest of the nation recognized Ezra was that kind of leader, but MAN!!! How was he being called to lead them???

He was to lead them in DIVORCING their foreign wives AND sending away any children born of them!!!

YIKES! This sounds totally COUNTER to all the teachings of scripture! It's a hairy mess of apparent contradictions, but I'm going to attempt to untangle it and reconcile it with the rest of the Word.

The Law makes provision for divorce, BUT Jesus said it was never God's will.

### **Matthew 19:7-8**

**7 They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? 8 He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.**

Paul says to keep your unbelieving spouse if he or she consents to live with you...

### **1 Corinthians 7:12-14**

**12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.**

Some scholars say that it's possible that this question arose in Corinth BECAUSE OF THIS precedent from Ezra.

So, God made provision in the Law for divorce, but Jesus said it wasn't God's will. Then Paul goes further, saying NOT to divorce an unbelieving spouse? Why then is divorced called for here in Ezra?

The situation in Ezra was very unique...

#### **1. These women were PAGANS.**

These weren't simply "unbelieving" spouses content to live with and be sanctified by their believing Israeli spouses. According to Nehemiah they were PAGANS, leading their husbands astray rather than being drawn closer to the Lord by them. Listen to this...

### **Nehemiah 13:23-24**

**23 In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.**

The children weren't even being taught the language of the Jews! There was ZERO consideration of assimilation. If their parents weren't even teaching them the language that would help them be part of the congregation of Israel, do you think they were teaching them to know the God of Israel? NO! They only knew the language of their pagan mother, and they likely only knew her god.

### **Nehemiah 13:25-26**

**25 And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.**

**"Foreign women made even [the wise Solomon] to sin,"** and the same was happening now. The foreign women weren't being brought closer to the true God by their husbands; *they* were leading their husbands away.

Because of the continued pursuit of their own cultural and religious practices, these wives more resembled the folks Paul described to the Corinthians when he said...

### **1 Corinthians 7:15-16**

**15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. 16 For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?**

They didn't know if these women would ever forsake their pagan ways and believe on the Lord. History showed it was more likely that they wouldn't, and that they'd eventually lead their husbands away.

## **2. These women were on God's DO NOT MARRY list.**

Here's the Lord's DO NOT MARRY list...

### **Deuteronomy 7:1-4**

**1 When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves,**

If you go back and look at Ezra 9, you'll see that these are the exact people with whom the nation was intermarrying!

**2 and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. 3 You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.**

Now, because God explicitly names ETHNIC GROUPS or RACES, those who despise the God of the Bible invariably say, "*What a RACIST God!*" That's what the culture calls everything they don't like now, right?

However, was God's commandment *RACIALLY* motivated? NO, it was a SPIRITUAL matter. As He said, "**They would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.**"

When God named these people groups in the Law as people Israel wasn't to intermarry with, He was IDENTIFYING THEM AS PAGAN. He was telling Israel, "*Don't even bother with these people. They're pagan. Don't marry, much less associate with them.*"

Today, God doesn't name specific ethnic groups; He simply says...

### **2 Corinthians 6:14**

**Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?**

There are those who want to argue that such passages of scripture teach that it's sin to marry someone of another race, but there's ZERO MENTION of race in this context! It literally says to NOT be unequally yoked or to PARTNER with UNBELIEVERS.

And you know what? That's the SAME PRINCIPLE the Israelites were supposed to live by!!!

If you're a believer, don't get hitched with an unbeliever! Why? Because they'll pull you down! It's just like forming the core of your friendships out of unbelievers.

### ILLUSTRATION OF BEING PULLED DOWN FROM A CHAIR

The same thing happens to believers who marry unbelievers. And if you shouldn't marry an unbeliever, do you think you should date one? NO.



### 3. These wives could have been EXTRA wives.

#### Deuteronomy 17:17

**And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.**

Given that the Law to kings wasn't to multiply wives, the citizens of the nation following the kings weren't to multiply wives either. If these foreign wives were additional to Israeli wives they already had, this would have been further reason not to have married them in the first place and further grounds for divorce.

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The situation Ezra dealt with was very different than the one Paul addressed. These women weren't merely lost, non-idol-worshiping wives content to live with the sanctifying, Christian influence of their husband. They were from nations God had already banned Israel from intermarrying with because He knew they'd bring their idols with them and lead their husbands (and ultimately the Nation) away.

They had to put these foreign wives away, but they didn't get to stop there. They had to SEND AWAY THE CHILDREN born of the foreign wives too! Why? Because they were just as "foreign as their moms."

The Nehemiah passage we looked at earlier showed us that they weren't even being taught the language of Israel, so we can reasonably infer that they weren't being taught to love the God of Israel either.

"But maybe they could have come around and chosen to believe in the Lord!" And maybe like their unbelieving moms, they wouldn't have. I thought one commentator I read brilliantly pointed out that a reason they had to put away the children of these marriages was BECAUSE THEY AFFECTED "INHERITANCE PATTERNS" WITHIN THE COMMUNITY. These kids were just as much foreigners as their mothers, so to have allowed them to inherit property in the Land would have been to undo the work of the Conquest.

What a MESS! And it all could have been avoided if Israel had just obeyed the Lord. I don't envy the task Ezra was about to tackle...

### **Ezra 10:5-6**

**5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.**

**6 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.**

A couple of weeks back we saw Ezra fast as he requested God's protection for the journey home. The InterVarsity Press [Bible Background Commentary](#), aptly described fasting...

**"The principle [of fasting] is that the importance of the request causes an individual to be so concerned about his or her spiritual condition that physical necessities fade into the background."**

Ezra wasn't fasting in order to make a request of God, though he would need great wisdom to navigate the task that laid ahead. No, he was so grieved by the spiritual condition of the Nation that the thought of eating or drinking just didn't occur to him.

### **Ezra 10:7-8**

**7 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 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.**

Forfeiture of property and expulsion from the congregation of Israel were corresponding punishments given that citizenship is what entitled a person to own property. If they gave up their citizenship, they gave up their property, and by violating the covenant, they were, in essence, turning their backs on the community.

Either you were part of the HOLY NATION, or you weren't, and Ezra had the authority to make such a proclamation because of the king's edict in Ezra 7:26...

26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.

### **Ezra 10:9-12**

**9 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. 10 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. 11 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. 12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, It is so; we must do as you have said.**

Now we come to it, The POWER of CONFESSION...

What is confession?

Ezra uses the Hebrew word TODAH ("to-daw"), which means CONFESSION as well as PRAISE, specifically in the raising of one's hands. When we raise our hands, what does it represent? SURRENDER or AVOWEL (admission, agreement, assent).

When the apostle John uses the word "confession" in 1 John 1:9, it's the Greek word HOMOLOGEO ("hom-ol-og-eh'-o"), which means to SAY THE SAME THING as another (i.e. to agree with, assent).

This is exactly what we see in the open square before the house of the Lord. In VERSE TEN we see the Lord's indictment through Ezra...

### **Ezra 10:10-12**

**10 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. 11 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.**

There's the command to OWN IT. In verse eleven Ezra tells the transgressors to CONFESS. "ADMIT IT!" Then he goes further, telling them to SHOW THEY MEAN IT by doing what's necessary to make things right.

**12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, It is so; we must do as you have said.**

There's the CONFESSION. **"It is so."** What's so? They had **"broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel."**

**"We must do as you have said."** Do what? Put away their foreign wives. Confession makes a way forward. It brings us to the threshold of repentance.

You see, anyone can say, "I'm sorry," right? But we can tell when they don't mean it, so what do we sometimes say in response to their "apology?"

"You're sorry FOR WHAT?" We need them to NAME IT. If they don't, their apology tastes fake. God expects the same thing. I mean, if we can't admit we've sinned by committing a certain action, what need do we have of forgiveness or salvation? If we're doing nothing wrong, then there's no need to change anything, right?

When we confess our sins, we shine a light on them. That's the whole context of 1 John 1. God is light. When we walk with God we walk in the light. God already sees our sin, but when we confess it, we force OURSELVES to see it and deal with it.

The nation confessed and agreed to put away the foreign women and any children born of them. WHAT A GUT-WRENCHING DECISION TO MAKE! However, in choosing a leader who would make them deal with their sin, and having confessed it, they were now prepared to DO GOD'S WILL.

#### **Ezra 10:13-15**

**13 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. 14 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.**

They were essentially saying, *"It's freezing, and it's pouring the rain, and there's so many of us who have transgressed in this way. We can't hurry through this!"* This needed to be handled properly and with care.

**15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.**

These guys wanted to get things over with, but thoroughness prevailed...

### **Ezra 10:16-17**

**16 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; 17 and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.**

So, the initial gathering took place on the twentieth day of the ninth month, and they began examining the matter city by city, house by house on the first day of the tenth month. It took ten days to assemble the council of elders for the investigation.

What was there to investigate? The issue that was likely at the heart of the proposed investigation was that some of the wives could have become proselytes like Rahab or Ruth. Therefore, they wouldn't have been deemed "foreigners," but rather part of the congregation of Israel.

After two months of investigations, all the foreign women and any children born of them who hadn't identified with the God of Israel alone had been sent away.

Can you imagine the sad labor of this investigative council? Two months of watching husbands hug a foreign bride, maybe a child or two, and then tearfully send them away...

Folks, anytime we knowingly sin, we invite such pain into our lives.

You'll never be called upon to divorce your spouse for the Lord's sake. Nobody gets to go into marriage counseling with Pastor Kevin saying, "Well, Preacher, the Lord's shown me that I never shoulda married her," okay?

However, there may be difficult, uncomfortable measures the Lord could be calling you to take in order to eradicate sin in your life.

Maybe a specific sin has a stronghold in your life, and you need an accountability partner to overcome it...

Maybe it's installing accountability software on your electronic devices to help you control your viewing habits...

Maybe it's establishing boundaries in your dating relationship in order to maintain sexual purity...

Perhaps as a married person it's establishing boundaries between yourself and others to protect yourself from being unfaithful to your spouse...

You know what, though? Most people who struggle with a specific sin REFUSE to take such measures because means ADMITTING THAT THEY STRUGGLE! They refuse to shine a light on it and deal with it. So, instead of admitting that they could possibly be wrong or prone to such a sin, they just continue in SILENT DEFEAT and SHAME.

These men experienced the POWER OF CONFESSION, though! These men disobeyed God, and the solution was something most wouldn't have had the strength to do, but they took the first step toward VICTORY by CONFESSING their sin. As a result, they stood on the threshold of REPENTANCE, and they let God CHANGE them.

The end of the chapter is a record of everyone who sinned by marrying the foreign women. Now, as much as some of you would like me to try and pronounce all those names, I'm just going to skip to the end...

**Ezra 10:44**

**All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.**

This is a FOREVER RECORD of their unfaithfulness to God...but you know what? It was also a FOREVER RECORD that they did what was necessary to honor God.