

Forgive US! • Ezra 9-10

INTRO • Read 9:1-4

1. It often happens that, as we make our way thru the Bible, we find something that parallels our time.
 2. Such is the case today with Ezra 9&10.
 3. While the specifics differ, the spiritual condition and remedy is the same.
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Set Scene

1. It's 80 yrs *after* the events we saw last week, when the 1st exiles returned from Babylon to Jrz.
2. Ezra, a Jewish priest & scribe, obtained permission from the Persian King Artaxerxes, to lead a 2nd return.
3. Ezra has a vision and mission.
 - a. He knew *why* everything had gone so horribly wrong for the Jews in the first place.
 - b. In short; They'd *neglected* God's Word.
 - c. Ezra knew the key to Judah's survival & success was in keeping God's Word at the center of national life.
 - d. Now that they'd been allowed to return, he wanted to make sure God's Word was taught.
 - e. Being a priest & scribe, he was the perfect guy to make that happen.
4. So Ezra & the exiles arrived back in Jrz and settled in.
 - a. He got to work, teaching the people in the Word and ways of God.
 - b. 4 months go by, then he gets news of something that rocks his world.
5. Many of the children & grandchildren of those who'd made the 1st return 80 yrs before had Gentile wives.
 - a. It wasn't just regular folk who'd done this.
 - b. Not a few of the *leaders* had, *even some priests*.
6. When Ezra heard this, he was shattered. Dumbfounded!
 - a. Listen, Ezra wasn't someone given to wild expressions of emotion.
 - b. Having been a member of the Persian Court, keeping calm was a prerequisite.
 - c. People who couldn't control themselves didn't last long in the presence of the Persian King.
7. But when Ezra heard that intermarriage with pagans was widespread, he was undone.
 - a. In evidence of intense grief, he tore his garments, plopped-down, & began pulling his hair.
 - b. He stayed that way for hours.
8. *Why?* What was so depressing? Why was this bad news?
 - a. Because Deut 7 forbade them marrying these people. >> Not out of prejudice of racism.
 - b. It was because of the ***danger*** these unions presented.
 - c. Being Canaanites, they were devoted to idols; the worship of which was corrupt, obscene, de-humanizing.
 - d. And it was precisely because their ancestors had blown off the prohibition of marrying them that had led to Judah's turn to idols and ruin at the hands of Babylon.
9. Now they're back with a 2nd chance, & ***WHAT?!?!?*** They're already apeing the errors of their ancestors.
10. Do you see why Ezra was ruined? THIS was the very kind of thing he wanted to make sure DIDN'T happen.
 - a. His entire vision & mission was to teach God's Word so it would shape their decisions and they could avoid the catastrophe of another exile.
 - b. But he hears that one of THE MAIN CAUSES of their previous judgment is already in play.
11. Talk about feeling like your entire life's a waste!
 - a. It's all been roses in Ezra's plan so far.
 - 1) He's had amazing favor with the Persian King and officials.
 - 2) They had a smooth trip from Babylon. // Everything's off to a great start.
 - b. Then they run straight into a brick wall.

12. So Ezra parks it and remains silent.

⁵ **At the evening sacrifice [about 3 pm] I arose from my fasting;**

1. The word speaks of *intense mourning*; a grief so great you *can't* eat.
2. People who've lost a close-loved one know what that's like.
3. More than a loss of appetite, just the *thought* of eating is nauseating.

and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, *and* our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day.

4. Ezra acknowledges God's judgment as righteous in light of their foolish rebellion.
5. Then he turns to God's amazing grace --

⁸ **And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg [a toe hold] in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage.**

6. Ezra recognizes their return to Judah & Jrz was God opening a door for them to make a ***far more important return*** = To Him.
7. Revival had begun. How far it went would ***depend*** on what they did with it.
8. Ezra understood the mixed-marriages as a ***roadblock*** to revival.

⁹ **For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰And now, O our God, → WHAT SHALL WE SAY AFTER THIS? // For ... we have forsaken Your commandments, ¹¹which You commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity.**

1. Many dismiss those words, '*uncleanness, abominations, impurity*' as the comments of a prudish, morally narrow-minded deity who wants to quash otherwise innocent pleasure.
2. Hardly! Archaeology had revealed what the worship of their idols entailed.
 - a. Ritual human sacrifice // The horrific abuse of women and children.
 - b. The utter degradation of the humanity of slaves and captives.
 - c. I won't describe their practices because of the tormented images that would linger in your mind.
3. Once you know what these idols worshippers did, words like *uncleanness, abomination, & impurity* are *far too mild* for them.
4. So God commanded --

¹² **Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave *it* as an inheritance to your children forever.'**

1. Alliances with Canaanites were not to be made, especially marriages.
2. Their survival as a nation depended on it.
3. But, they disregarded God's command and did what He said not to.

4. So they lost their land and were carried away into exile.

13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this, ¹⁴ should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that *there would be* no remnant or survivor?

1. Exile & ruin was the result of their ancestors' disobedience.
2. God's mercy and grace brought them back from captivity.
3. What's in store now that they're repeating the error of their ancestors? // What peril are they in?

15 O LORD God of Israel, You *are* righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as *it is* this day. Here we *are* before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!"

Us / We

1. Ezra's prayer is *remarkable*.
2. This *righteous* man, sold-out to God & zealous for holiness, doesn't with pointed-finger condemn the guilty.
 - a. He doesn't stand at a distance with a sneer at that "basket of deplorables" ruining everything.
 - b. He stands *with* them to confesses sin as *one of* them.
 - c. His prayer is filled with "us & we" not "them & those."
3. He's not alone on this. Both spiritual standouts *Daniel & Nehemiah* do the same in their prayers.
 - a. They say, "**WE** have sinned against the God of heaven."
 - b. An observer would say to them, "What are you talking about? You're a saint!"
 - c. They'd reply, "I'm interceding on behalf of my people. We need mercy and *every voice* that can be raised for it needs to."
4. There is much for us to learn from this as we pray for *our* land & people.
 - a. We are a nation-divided. Society's polarized into ideological camps that only get further apart.
 - b. Both sides look at the other not just as different, but *dangerously wrong; evil* even.
5. How *easy*, it would have been be, *expected* even, for Ezra to pray, "God smite those wicked people who married idol-worshippers. They've forsaken Your ways. Let them not be numbered among those of **US** who look to You."
6. But Ezra understood God's heart. He prefers mercy to judgment.
 - a. James 2:13 says that mercy triumphs over judgment.
 - b. Judgment only comes after mercy's run out, and God is incredibly long-suffering with us.
 - c. Our job, as followers of Christ, isn't to call down lightning bolts of God's wrath.
 - d. It's to plead for mercy and forgiveness for those who need it.
7. One day Jesus & the boys were travelling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem.
 - a. They were going to stop at a certain village but the residents made it clear they weren't welcome.
 - b. Brothers James & John asked Jesus, "Do You want us to call down fire from heaven on them; make some Samaritan s'mores out of 'em?"
 - c. Jesus said, "That's not the attitude My followers are to have. I didn't come to destroy; I came to save."
8. God wants no one to perish. Jesus came to save FROM judgment, not FOR it.
 - a. He paid the ultimate price so that none NEED God's wrath.
 - b. We must repent of all *superiority* that distances us from others
 - c. & instead stand *with* them, pleading with God, not on *their* behalf but on *ours*.
 - d. We must stop keeping an inventory of the sins of others & instead ask God to forgive US!
9. Jesus told the story of 2 men who went to the temple to worship.

- a. One was a Pharisee the other a tax-collector.
- b. The Pharisee bragged to God of how good he was and all the good he did.
- c. He compared himself to the wicked tax-collector standing not far away.
- d. Overwhelmed with guilt, the tax-collector begged God to forgive.
- e. Jesus said the tax-collector was forgiven, while the Pharisees prayers were heard by none but himself.

10:1 Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly. ² And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, *one* of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

IOW - “It’s not too late. We can still do what’s right.”

³ Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴ Arise, for *this* matter is your *responsibility*. We also *are* with you. Be of good courage, and do it.”

1. As hard as this was, it was the right thing to do.
2. Don’t think they sent their wives & children off to perish.
 - a. That would have been as contrary to God’s will as marrying them.
 - b. These women went with support from their husbands *back* to the families they came from.
 - c. As well, the only wives sent back were those who clung to their idols.
 - d. It had always been the case that Gentiles could convert to the Faith in God. Many had.
3. But those who carried on in devotion to their idols were a real threat that had to end.
4. With their departure, a new season of God’s blessing came to the land.

CONCLUSION // Jeremiah Lamphier

1. What strikes me about this story is that reform & renewal began with one person’s repentance & prayer - Ezra.
2. Just a block from where the Twin Towers fell in 2001, a remarkable movement began almost 150 yrs before.
3. It was Sept, 1857.
4. A church on Fulton Street moved to a new building but didn’t want to leave it’s old building empty so they turned it over to one of their members to hold prayer meetings in.
 4. His name is Jeremiah Lamphier.
 - a. He began by spending several days seeking God on how best to use the place.
 - b. He walked the streets of NY, praying over the City’s needs.
 - c. One day he saw a businessman who was clearly distressed.
 - d. Lamphier knew why. The nation was in the midst of an economic crisis.
 - e. Lamphier struck on an idea. He called a noontime prayer meeting for businessmen.
 - f. Wall Street wasn’t far from the Fulton Street church, so he printed up tracts and passed them out inviting businessmen to an hour of prayer at Noon, the next Wednesday.
 - h. The day arrived and it was just Lamphier there from Noon to 12:30.
 - 1) At 12:35, a few others arrived. By the end of the hr, there were a half-dozen.
 - 2) The next wk there were 20; the week after 40, then 100.
 - 3) In 3 mns there were over a hundred noontime prayer meetings w/50K.
5. It was a bonafide revival.

- a. It spread into New England where the evangelist Charles Finney said so many were converted they couldn't keep up accurate statistics.
- b. It spread to the South where so many were converted, they had to meet in factories & warehouses.
- c. In Newark, NJ with a population of 70K -- 2,785 came to faith.
6. Wherever the revival went, multiple prayer meetings broken out.
 - a. Every church was filled with people praying at 6:30 am, Noon, & 6:30 pm; every day of the week.
 - b. When churches filled, they met in theaters & halls.
 - c. Nearly all stores posted a sign in their window at Noon, "Closed for Prayer-Will reopen after."
7. In Wash DC prayer meetings were held all over.
 - a. The Academy of Music Hall saw 5,000 gathered for prayer several times a day.
 - b. Prayer was held in the chambers of Congress.
8. In the Mid-West, the Baptists had so many converts, they had to cut a hole in the ice of local lakes to baptize them all.
9. In a packed prayer meeting at the town hall of Kalamazoo, Michigan, the leader said, "There're too many of us for each to share a prayer request so write them out and give them to me & I'll read them and someone will pray for you."
 - a. The people wrote out their requests and handed them in.
 - b. He read the first one, "A woman asks the prayers of this company for the conversion of her husband who's far from God."
 - 1) Immediately a blacksmith stood and said, "My wife's a praying woman. I know I'm far from God. Will someone help me?"
 - 2) A lawyer stood, "I think it was *my* wife that wrote that note. *I'm* far from God."
 - 3) **6** husbands stood all saying it was certainly *their* wife. All 6 were converted that day.
10. Dr. J. Edwin Orr observed, "In evangelism, the evangelist seeks the sinner. In these times of revival, the sinners come running to God."
11. In the 18 mns that followed that 1st Fulton Street Prayer meeting, 1 million were converted, 3% of the total population of the country.
12. And it began with *one man* who loved God and saw the desperation in a businessman's face.

Let's end with Ezra's word in 9:8-9

⁸ And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Do it again, God.

Our ears have heard the stories of Your mighty out-stretched hand,
 Tales of reform and revival. Please: Do it again.
 You are a gracious God Who delights in mercy.

We've sinned against You, turned our backs on You, though You've been so good to us.
 We know what we deserve. But don't give us justice, give us grace.
 Forgive us, oh God. // Revive us once more.