

Chapter 9. As you turn to Ezra chapter 9, we're going to read the entirety of the chapter and even the first verse of chapter 10. But I believe the sermon, unless I'm led otherwise as I'm preaching, is just going to be the first five verses. Simply because when I worked on it, it got a bit long, and I didn't believe it would be wise to try to do the whole chapter, which was frankly to my surprise when I started preparing, but the material kept coming.

So here we are. Before we read the word, let's ask God to help us. Father, again, we do plead with thee to help us by your spirit, for even the reading of your word is something that we cannot do profitably in ourselves. Bless us in the name of Jesus, amen. Hear now the word of God, Ezra chapter 9, beginning in verse 1.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness, the land of the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.

As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 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. And at the evening sacrifice, I arose 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, saying, oh 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. From the days of our fathers to this day, we have been in great guilt, and for our iniquities, We, our kings and our priests, have been given in to the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame. as it is today. But now, for a brief moment, favor has been shown by the Lord our God to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves, yet our God has not forsaken us into our slavery. but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving, to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem. And now, O our God, what shall we say after this?

For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants, the prophets saying the land that you are entering to take possession of it is a land in pure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore, Do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever. And after all that has come upon us, for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, Seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so there should be no remnant nor any to escape? O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped As it is today, behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you

because of this. Well, as a 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.

Lessons reading of God's word when he had the his blessing to the proclamation of it. Well, it's fair to say that at the end of Ezra 8, things concluded on a high note. Everything looked pretty good at the conclusion of Ezra chapter 8. They've made it back to Jerusalem. They've held a worship service, things seem to be going well. And then when you come to Ezra chapter nine, it begins with these words, after these things.

And if you had to finish that sentence, after these things, knowing how well chapter eight had concluded, you might finish it something like this. After these things, they lived happily ever after, the end. However, that's what we might call fairytale Christianity. And while fairytale Christianity might make you feel good and it might sound nice, it might give you butterflies in your stomach, it's not real Christianity.

When you come to chapter nine, even though things had ended so well at the end of chapter eight, you see that the people still have a problem. And it's this problem that for whatever reason, they just can't seem to shake. And what that problem is, is sin. While there have been encouraging movements as you go throughout chapter eight, they get to chapter nine and there is still this sin that resides within the covenant community. The external visible church, the people of God, at least in name, there's still this sin within the community. And so what are they going to do having this sin in their lives as it's made apparent to them that there is sin in their lives? Well, Ezra begins to lead the way in confession. They confess their sins by God's grace as they begin to see their sins. And that's what you see Ezra starting to do in our sermon tonight.

Well, many of you know my pastor friend, Seth Starkey. He's said before to me that he wishes there were a church called Repentance Presbyterian Church. And that would be a good name for a church. There's plenty of faith Presbyterian churches. There are plenty of grace Presbyterian churches. But why have you never seen, unless you have, a repentance Presbyterian church. Why have you never even seen a church called repentance? I've not seen a church called repentance.

Why is that? I suggest that, in part anyways, it's because repentance and confession of sin means that you're really going to deal honestly with your sins before God. It might be fear-inducing for a church to have that as sort of their label. We're known as the people who are going to confess our sins to God. We want to be known as the people who are going to say what our sins really are before our Heavenly Father. We're going to speak of them truthfully to God. That's what confession is. It's speaking about your sins honestly to God, going to God with your sins. And you might say, well, do I really want to do that? Should you really want to do that? Should I really want to do that? Well, we come to this text tonight and we see this happening.

We see Ezra and these people down the road in later chapters, chapter 10, confessing their sin. And what I really want us to see is just one major point as we come to this topic of confession tonight. And it's gonna come from the first five verses, and this is what it is. What God has separated, let no man join together. That's what I want us to see tonight in these first five verses. What God has separated, let no man join together. You come to these first five verses, you see that God's people are called to be holy.

And the word holy, as you may know, simply means separate. And if You are or set apart. And if something is to be separated, it's got to be separated from something to something else. And that's one of the ideas that the word holiness is getting at, being set apart from one thing to another thing.

And so these people are called to be holy. They're called to be separate. set apart from one thing to something else. You might think of it like a Band-Aid. If you have a Band-Aid, you take it off, you separate it from your skin, and hopefully you put it in the trash can. It's separated from one thing to another thing.

And so God's people are called to be separate, to be holy. We are to be separated from sin, and we are to be separated to righteousness. That's what God has called his people to do, to be. And so when you come to these first few verses, you see God's people doing the exact opposite. Instead of being separated from sin to righteousness, we read this in verse one, the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations.

And then a little bit later in verse two, for they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons. What were these abominations associated with the people of the land? One author I read this past week said these abominations would have included things like idolatry, blatant idolatry, sexual immorality of various kinds, including homosexuality and perhaps even bestiality, They would have included things perhaps like child sacrifice. These and other very heinous and vile sins and practices would have been associated with these people. And yet, God's people are marrying these women of this land.

And in doing this, they are setting themselves up for utter and complete apostasy. It was sin to marry these people. It was sin because of their religion. This is not an issue of race or ethnicity. It's the fact that these people are unconverted. They're unbelievers. They did not know and worship the only living and true God as God and give him the glory due his name. They were pagans.

And this is still a truth that is abiding today, that a Christian should not marry an unbeliever. In fact, you can go further based on the evidence of Scripture as a whole. For example, Psalm 1, to throw out one example, the best friends of the believer should never be unbelievers. Not to say that you don't associate with unbelievers, not to say you're not friends with unbelievers, but your best friends ought never to be unbelievers if you are a Christian. And certainly your spouse, you should never marry knowing that they are an unbeliever, if in fact they are an unbeliever.

And so that's what they're doing. They're marrying these pagans. But if it wasn't enough for them to be taking these women to themselves, it's even worse. They're taking them for their own sons too. These men had given themselves over so wholly, so completely to wickedness that they were not content to paraphrase and not saying they don't repent later and are not saved. in this moment, they're not content to just damn themselves, to paraphrase John Murray, but they want to damn their own children. They're not content just to live in wickedness themselves. They are trying to help their own children live in wickedness. That's the desire of their heart, that they want to not only do sinful things themselves, but they want to encourage it in the lives of not just other people, but their very own children. I mean, this is heinous. heinous sin that we're viewing here in the community of God. But who is to blame for all this? Who is to blame for all this sin in the covenant community? Well, you could imagine some of the Israelites saying, it's not my fault.

You should see the way those pagan girls dress. You could imagine some of these men saying, I'm going to marry her, but I promise I intend to tell her about Yahweh. My intention is to convert her down the road. They could try to blame it in some way or another on the world, but the truth is this is their fault. This is the covenant community of God. In our terms, we would say this is the visible church of God. and they're to blame for this.

It was them who took these women. The women, however they may have dressed or whatever they may have done, the text doesn't say that they were throwing themselves at the men. And even if they were, the men still should have trusted in Yahweh and said no. But in any case, the text reads that they are taking these women to themselves and for their children.

But has anything really changed today? Let's be honest. Look at the church in our country. How did the country get where it is today? Our country is filled with child sacrifice. Okay, filled with child sacrifice. Our country is filled with immorality.

And we can stand back as the church and say, well, look at what they're doing. But in at least some measure, and I would suggest to you large measure, we've gotten here because the church wanted to please the world. Because we've done the sorts of things that go on in this text, and as a result, we've reaped the consequences for our sin, which is a declining society. But it could also happen on a more individual level, where even as individual Christians, we might say, Well, the problem is with my Christian life, the reason I'm not maturing as much as I would like to be maturing, I'm not as strong in my faith as I might like to be, is because of this, that, and the other. All of these things out here, these worldly people, these worldly television, whatever it might be, these worldly things, and those things are real. We live in a very sin-cursed and fallen world.

But an illustration I saw recently, I think, captures this well. I saw this picture of Fred from Scooby Doo and he's standing there and in front of him is this villain that's tied up with a rope and the villains got this mask over the head so you can't see the villain and the words on the picture say, now time to find out who's been sabotaging my walk with Christ. And the next image Fred's taken off the mask from the villain And Fred is looking back at Fred.

And that's really very true. There's a lot of truth in this, that I have to be careful as a Christian not to think that the whole reason I'm not where I would like to be is simply the fault of the pagan world in which I do live. But it's my own inclinations, my own heart. God's people are supposed to be holy. They're supposed to be separate. They're called in verse two a holy race or a holy seed. And this word seed, and it's translated at least in the ESV as race, but it's really just the word seed.

It's the same word from Genesis 3.15.

The seed of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent. And so what you're really seeing happen here in context of the whole of scripture is the seed of the woman, the covenant community of God, is marrying the seed of the serpent. That's really what's going on here in Ezra chapter nine. It's these people are supposed to be representing the seed of the woman, the church, but instead they're marrying in with the seed of the serpent. And this has happened before, as you might remember, in Genesis chapter six. This is the first time this happened. And the result was ultimately the flooding of the earth.

But God's people are supposed to be holy. They're supposed to not compromise with sin. But these people in our text are compromising, and we could even say it's worse than that. They're fully throwing themselves into sin. They're pursuing sin. There's no fight indicated in these first five verses from the covenant community. Now later we'll see that, praise the Lord, we get into chapter 10, but these people are not fighting against sin as far as at this point in the text. We don't get any sense at this time that these men are at war with sin. We actually get every indication that these are men who are at peace with sin.

These are people who are enjoying their sin. They're throwing themselves at it with everything they've got. And this is called faithlessness in our text. This word faithlessness indicates the breach of a relationship. They were supposed to have a faithful relationship with God but now they've been having a faithless relationship with God. There's been a breach, they've been committing we could say adultery, they've been cheating if you will on God. They're supposed to have this intimate relationship but they're giving themselves up to these women instead.

But in Ezra, in chapter 9, verses 3 through 5, you see his response here. Starting in verse 3, as soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 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." So you see here Ezra's response. He tears his robe. He actually plucks out some of his own beard, his own hair. We read in chapter 10 verse 1 that there was weeping.

Do you find this strange that Ezra would respond in such an emotive way? to hearing of the people's sin. Why did he weep over their sin? Why did he care so much about their sin? And it's ultimately because he loved God and he loved his neighbor. This wasn't weeping because he hated them or weeping because he was, I don't know, just a crybaby or something of that. It's because he loved God and he loved his neighbor and it broke his heart.

George Whitefield, the famous preacher in the first great awakening was sometimes criticized because in some of his preaching he would weep. And he said that he wept for those who would not weep for themselves. He knew that there were people to whom he was preaching who didn't care about their sin, didn't care that they were going to perish forever and ever and ever. They didn't care about the glory of God.

And this stirred up George Whitefield's heart such that he would on occasion be weeping in his preaching. I once knew a man who came to one of my brothers and was actually in this man's wedding, but that doesn't really matter. But he came to my brother and he told my brother, I'm committing adultery. And my brother began to cry. And this man proceeded to just stare at him. He didn't care. He had no remorse for his sin. He didn't have any shame. It didn't really matter to him.

I think he actually found it strange that my brother would cry. A pastor friend of mine serves in a church, and he carries the burdens of his flock so heavily upon his heart that Sometimes his wife will have to say to him, you care more about their sins than they do, because he'll get so weighed down. It's not weighed down because he's being judgmental, it's being weighed down because he cares.

There's an emotional side to the Christian faith, an emotional side to the Christian faith that needs to be embraced, especially by ministers. you should so love your fellow Christians, especially here within our own church, that

when we hear of sin in our one another life, when we see it in another life, or in our friends' lives, our children's lives, it should affect you. It should be something, and again, it's not judgmental. It's, I love my friend in Christ. I love this person, and I know that this is eating them alive. I know this is not good for them, and I care about them. There should be an appropriate burdening of caring for one another and carrying the burdens of one another.

Now, as I wrote this sermon, I could not help but ask the question, why don't we weep in the church anymore over sin. And I want to speak to this carefully and cautiously because there's no desire on my heart to put burdens on our hearts that God doesn't put on our hearts.

I do not believe there is evidence in scripture to my knowledge that suggests that this should be the regular pattern of the Christian life. I don't think Ezra was constantly weeping in this sort of way. So we want to be careful not to say this sort of activity, this sort of emotional, it should be this sort of the everyday, all the time experience. That's clearly not, I don't see that in scripture. I don't see that in scripture.

If y'all do, we can talk afterwards. So I want to be careful not to see this as it needs to be the everyday activity of the believer. And I also want to be cautious because God has constituted all of us differently. We have different constitutions. Some of us are more emotional in nature. God has just made us that way. We wear our emotions on our sleeves. Other people are a bit more reserved and carry things more inwardly in their hearts. That's just the way God has made us.

And so just because one person has to respond one way doesn't mean the other person has to respond in the exact same way. So with those sort of qualifiers, if you will, I do still think it's a question that we should ask. Why do you not see weeping over sin in the church anymore? And I really think there's only two ways to answer that question. And here are the two ways that I believe that it can be answered.

One, we just don't sin as seriously as previous generations. So we're not weeping because we're just not sinning as seriously as previous generations. Or the other answer is because we don't take our sin as seriously as previous generations. So we should take sin seriously.

Now, if you're here tonight and you are not a crier, I have siblings who I think are made of robotic material. They just don't emote like that. But I do want to say this. There is no way you can read these first five verses and come away with any other response than this.

Sin must be taken seriously. Maybe for you that is not crying. But it has to be serious. There's no way you can read Ezra's response and say, well, I'm not a crier, okay, but it has to be taken seriously. His response is too overwhelming to be read in any other light. But who's gonna ever do this? Who's gonna ever take sin seriously? The text tells us, people who take the Bible seriously.

Verse four. than all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel. You see, it was these people who were trembling at the word of God who gathered around Ezra because they took God's word seriously, they took their sin

seriously. Because they wanted to please their heavenly father, they cared about their sin. They knew it was grievous to him, and so it was grievous to them. They trembled at God's word, and so they took it seriously.

But in the midst of the harder things of this passage, there's this very encouraging note. And that is this. When you come to verse four, you see all these people start to gather around Ezra. And you see the same thing in chapter 10, verse one. It even mentions the children in chapter 10, verse one. And what you see happening is the humility that Ezra is exercising is drawing in other people to exercise the same sort of humility.

His heart break over sin was helping by the Spirit these other people to see how their heart ought to likewise be breaking over their sin. Has this ever happened to you? This has happened in my life on a handful of occasions where someone confesses a sin to you. And their humility is so amazing that you find yourself humbled, and you find yourself wanting to repent more, and you find yourself wanting to turn from more sin than you did before. There should be this attraction in our lives when a brother or a sister is opening up about their sin where we should, when we know, we're just being honest here, we know apart from the Spirit, there is no way I would have been as humble as that person. There's no way I would have been willing to open up about my sin or the way I knew I had done that thing but I would never have confessed it. But when somebody does that sometimes it can draw us in and it can make us go, I want to grow too. I want to be humble too. And that's this really really beautiful thing happening here amidst the heartbreak is the way it's encouraging the covenant community to break fresh over their sins together.

And where does it send Ezra? Where does this confession of sin, this acknowledgement of sin, send Ezra? And where should the acknowledgement of your sin send you? Well, it sends Ezra in verse five, it sends him to prayer and worship. It sends him to prayer and worship. And at the evening sacrifice, I arose 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." This is clearly the context of worship because there's this evening sacrifice taking place and he goes and he prays to the Lord. These sins, notice, do not keep Ezra from prayer and worship. These sins send Ezra to prayer and worship.

And maybe you're here tonight or maybe you know people who are at a place in their life where they want to make this argument. Surely you've heard it with somebody in your life where they'll say, I've just sinned too greatly to go to church this week. I have just blown it too much to go worship God today. Beloved, that's exactly where you're supposed to go. God wants you to come to him. and acknowledge that. He doesn't want you to clean yourself up before you come into his presence. He'll do the cleaning. He'll do the work. I heard this analogy not so long ago. You don't clean yourself up and then take a shower. You take a shower and get cleaned up.

And when you come to the Lord Jesus Christ, You don't clean yourself up and come to him. You come to him and he'll clean you up. You go to him in prayer. You come to worship. You don't allow your sins to keep you. That's what the devil wants you to do. He knows that if you come to church, you're gonna hear about Jesus and you might actually be encouraged to grow in grace and to repent of that sin. So he doesn't want you to come, but you come. Let these sins, whatever they might be, or if you have a friend with whom you speak and you know they're in this place, encourage them. to go to worship, even in the midst of their sins, and ask God to help them.

But there's a sacrifice mentioned in verse five, and I don't think we want to miss this. And at the evening sacrifice, it's actually mentioned at the end of verse four too, until the evening sacrifice, the end of verse four, and at the evening sacrifice, verse five, I rose from my fasting.

And the evening sacrifice here represented the only hope that Ezra and these people had. And perhaps, not that this would be my desire at all, but hopefully I'm not reading too much into the text at this point, but I suggest that perhaps it was knowing that this sacrifice had been slaughtered. Perhaps it was that fact that gave Ezra the courage to get up and go and worship God and confess his sins.

In other words, it was this fact. They knew that they needed bloody sacrifice to atone for this great iniquity that they had been committing. And this sacrifice is shed for them at this point. And it points them forward to the promised Messiah to come. And in that strength.

Ezra can now with confidence confess his sins and the sins of the people because apart from that sacrifice, there was no access, there was no hope, but this sacrifice represented Christ and the substitutionary atonement, that they would need a substitute for their sins and that animal is sacrificed and they see that and so they go and they worship.

Well, you might have some sin tonight in your life and it's something from which you do not want to separate. You're unwilling to separate from this sin. You know that this sin is keeping you from following Jesus with your whole heart, but you just want to hold on to it. Well, how are you going to deal with that reality? If that's you tonight, how are you going to deal with that reality?

The example we see in our text is turn and worship God and pray through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. You turn back to the Lord God through the sacrifice, you pray to him and you worship him. And that thing, he can begin to remove it. He can begin to chop it off. He can begin to grow you from that thing and grow you in grace.

Perhaps one thing we learn, especially from these first five verses of Ezra 9, is just this, that we should take our sins seriously, and we should take the sacrifice for our sins seriously. That when you take your sins seriously, it ought to have the effect of driving you to Jesus. The point of these five verses, in the context of the broader scope of scripture is not that you would merely mope in your sin. It's that seeing your sin and something of the heinousness of it, you would flee to Christ. It would drive you to God, not keep you from him.

Foul I to the fountain fly, save me. a wash me Savior or I die. That's what these verses should do for us. They should be a call to take the sin of our lives seriously and take the Savior seriously and go to him. Beloved, I assure you, there is no sin in your life too deep for him to cleanse by his blood. Let us pray. Almighty God, we call out to you tonight and we pray that you would help us learn how to weep God, I will say for myself, but I surely am not alone. Father, help us to take the sins of our lives seriously and to take the Savior of our lives seriously.

Open up our hearts to break over our sin that we would rejoice in our righteousness, the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh God, that's not something that we can produce, oh Lord God. It's not something that we can sort of conjure up. We want a spirit-wrought hatred of our sin and love for Jesus. Not some sort of man-made silly stuff, but a real heart that hates our sin and loves Jesus. Would you help us to that end, oh Father? For we indeed know that it is needed, but we know that we can't do it. We ask this in the name of Jesus, amen.