

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 5, Ezra 9-10

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata in his teaching on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 5, Ezra 9-10.

Turning your Bibles to Ezra chapter 9. In chapter 9 we are confronted with the sin of the people.

Just because people came back from exile does not mean they all obeyed the law or God. We see here the problem of the sin of intermarriage. Starting in verse 1 of chapter 9.

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.

So what's interesting here is to see that it's not just the people, but when you have sin in the leadership, then you're at a different level of problems. The priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land with their abominations. And then they list who these people are.

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 missed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men have been foremost.

As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled my 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.

Now, God's law was clear when it came to intermarriage. Again, the law prohibited intermarrying between Israelites and foreigners. Again, Exodus 34, starting in verse 11, is clear. God and the people were renewing their covenant.

And we read here in Exodus 34, Observe what I command to you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst.

You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim. For you shall worship no other God. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after other gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited. You eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters, of your sons and their daughters, whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods.

A similar list is presented in Deuteronomy chapter 4. 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. 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. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn away your sons from following me to serve the other gods. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will destroy you quickly.

It's very important to understand. The problem here was not their ethnicity. The problem was that they were worshiping other gods. For example, Moses married an Ethiopian. Boaz was married to Ruth the Moabitess. But again, these people came into the family of God. The problem here is not ethnicity.

The problem is that they were not Yahweh worshipers. The problem was their worship practices. This has nothing to do with racism. This had to do with religious purity. As Fensham says, "The influence of a foreign mother with her connection to another religion on her children would ruin the pure religion of the Lord and would create a syncretistic religion running contrary to everything in the Jewish faith. In the end, it was a question of the preservation of their identity, their religious identity.

How does Ezra reply? Ezra is grieved deeply. And he exteriorizes this by tearing his clothes and pulling his hair from his beard and from his head. It was a custom that many ancient Near Eastern people had to tear their clothes and dishevel their hair as a sign of mourning.

We see that in 2 Samuel 13, 2 Kings 22, Job 1, and Isaiah 22. The tearing of clothes is a modified ritual of nakedness, and the pulling of the hair is a modified form of shaving.

Ezra's actions revealed what's in his heart: pain and suffering because the people are going after other gods.

By the way, other god-fearing men and women joined Ezra, according to the text, ministering to him with their presence until the time of the evening sacrifice. The gravity of the situation and the pain in his heart leads Ezra to fall to his knees in prayer. Again, what a great example for today's Christian and today's Christian leader.

We need to identify ourselves with the people that we lead, and we need to mourn for their sin. Not pointing it out with our finger, not being vindictive, but sharing our pain with God. Today's Christian leader, like Ezra, needs to spend a considerable amount of time in prayer, not as a last resort, as sometimes we do, but as a first impulse.

And Ezra turns to God in prayer. And that's what we have here for the rest of chapter 9. At the evening sacrifice, Ezra writes in the first person again, 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, saying, O my God, I am ashamed and blushed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to heaven. What do you mean, our? Ezra was not guilty.

But what Ezra does, it's what every leader should do, identify with the people. Again, a good leader never shakes his vindictive figure in the face of the people, but a good leader identifies with the people. Daniel did the same thing.

Nehemiah will do the same thing. And Ezra does the same thing here. He identifies himself with his people when he confesses corporate sin.

He refers to God as my God. But notice when he talks about sin, he says, our iniquities. He identifies himself with the people even though he is not guilty of those sins.

The verse 7.

7 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 into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. **8** 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^h within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.

Ezra realizes what's happening. God brought us back. He's giving us restoration.

For we are slaves, verse 9, Yet our God has not forsaken us in 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^c in Judea and Jerusalem.

10 “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, **11** which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. **12** 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.’

13 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, **14** 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 that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? **15** 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.”

Ezra confesses corporate sin.

Ezra identifies with his people. All these questions that he has are rhetorical questions that demand the answer, no. Shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? No, that is the answer that should be answered right away.

Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us? Yes, again, it's a rhetorical question demanding the answer, yes. But God knows, Ezra knows who God is, and he exalts God for being a God of grace, justice, and righteousness. Again, Ezra's prayer is a great example for today's followers of Christ, and for today's Christian leader.

Programs that we have in our churches, no matter how elaborate or extravagant, can never be a substitute for a strong prayer life. Like Ezra, we need to learn how to confess personal and corporate sin. Like Ezra, we need to learn to identify ourselves with the people to whom we minister.

The worst thing we can do in church leadership is to have an us versus them mentality. It's us, it's a family. A leader that has a holier-than-thou attitude will not get very far.

The leader who humbles himself in order to identify with the one who is wronged will succeed in being like our Lord Jesus, who made himself nothing, took the form of

a servant, and humbled himself for our sake, as Paul writes in Philippians 2. So, what do you do when there is sin in the camp? What does the leader do? Chapter 10 tells us what he does. He is calling his people to holiness. He is calling his people to repentance.

That's what we have in Chapter 10, the first four verses. The exhortation is holiness. Remember, you are to be set apart. You are to be different.

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^a and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. **4** Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it."

I want to mention here something very important. This is not a prescriptive passage.

You are not to take this and say, O, look, they put aside, let's say, divorce their wives, and then if you are married to a non-believer you should do the same. No. We have to look at the entire counsel of God.

And God hates divorce. And 1 Corinthians 7 is clear. If the unbelieving spouse wants to say, You shall not divorce, two wrongs doesn't make a right.

This is a descriptive passage. It tells us what happened. But Ezra, again, starts by leading by example.

He prays and weeps over the sin of the people although he did not commit the sin. Again, he leads by example. He identifies with his.

But in this case, even though this person who comes to him, Shecaniah, is not listed among the offenders, he is a lay leader who also identifies with his people. And again, he says, We have done this. Now, this expression, foreign women, is very interesting.

It appears ten times in the Old Testament. It first appears in conjunction with King Solomon, who married foreign women. And again, 1 Kings identified them as Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite.

Both the Kings and Ezra and Nehemiah's context suggest that these women were idolatrous, non-Jewish women. Again, the problem was not intermarriage with

foreigners per se that caused Ezra such consternation but with foreigners who were syncretistic, pagan, and idolaters. I like Shecaniah.

He follows Ezra's example. He doesn't say, Well, everybody's doing it. No.

He wants to deal with the sin and he wants to make it right. Again, those guilty of the sin of intermarriage must commit to put away not only the wives, but also, the Bible says here, children. This is a very harsh proposal, again, in view of today's understanding of marriage.

But again, the problem here is that Jewish men married foreign women contrary to the law of God. These marriages were considered illegal from the start. It's not an easy thing to do.

That's why the exhortation, Be Strong, was very, very important. It could have reminded Ezra of Moses' encouraging words to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31. Be strong.

Or, be strong, the words that God had for Joshua in chapter 1, verses 6 and 9. What is interesting is that the people repent. We all know of instances where you have people who you confront them, and you confront them with the word, and they justify sin, or they blame other people. But in this case, there seems to be at least repentance, at least for the beginning, verses 5 and 6.

5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an 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,^b neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Not only that, verses 7 and 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.

Again, that seems pretty harsh, but it was meant to bring everybody together, verses 9 and 11.

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.” Sometimes the job of a leader is to confront sin and that's what Ezra does. You have broken faith and married foreign women. Make confession to the Lord.

Again, he's asking people to confess sin and of course to repent and to turn from that sin. It is not enough to identify sin. It is not enough to confess sin.

We need to repent of sin. We need to turn from that sin. Separate yourselves here points to the idea of holiness.

And again, we see the reaction of the people. They don't justify their sin. They don't hide their sin.

They don't make excuses for their sin. Verses 12 and on.

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

Admission of guilt is very necessary and the importance of the repentance process. And the people agree with Ezra's indictment. It is so. We must do as you have said.

And they agree to do it, but they're asking for time. And you might say, everybody agreed with it, right? Everybody stood up and applauded. No.

Verses 15 and on say,

Only Jonathan, the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah, the son of Tikvah opposed this.

And then what happens when you have an opposition? Well, they gain supporters.

“And Meshullam and Shabbethai, the Levites, supported them.”

Not only did they have opposition, they had opposition from the leadership, in this case, Levitical leadership.

16 Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men,^e 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.

Despite the opposition, Ezra takes into account the people's recommendation.

Their task is to examine the matter of 110 cases. And their work lasts for three months. Wow. That is a lot. And we are told who these people are in verses 18 to 44. If you ever have a problem sleeping, you can always go through this list and it will put you to sleep really quickly.

But the reason they are mentioned is because it is important. Notice please, verses 18 and 19 talk about the sons of the priests. Again, you are talking about the sins getting into the families of those in leadership.

When you look at this list, you have 17 priests, 6 Levites, 3 gatekeepers, 1 singer, and 84 laity. Just as in the day of Eli, 1 Samuel 1-3, even some sons of the priests have committed the sins of intermarriage. Again, the fact that the list starts with priests, again, highlights the fact that religious leaders and their families are not exempt from sin.

Verses 20 to 24, again you have remaining cultic officials, Levites, singers, gatekeepers. Starting in verse 25, you have the laity under the rubric of all Israel. And then it ends abruptly by indicating, and I quote, some of the women had even born children.

That's how the book ends. Very, very interesting way of ending a book. But again, from a practical perspective, for the Christ follower, you have prayer, you have fasting, you have confession of sin, repentance of sin.

It's very practical because there's a time when we need to get down on our knees to pray, but there's a time when we get off our knees and do something. Piety, as someone said, piety is no substitute for preparation, and neither is preparation a substitute for piety. Both of them have to go together.

Ezra starts on his knees in prayer, but then he goes on and does something about the sin. Piety and preparation, piety and action need to go together. And that is the book of Ezra.

It doesn't end here. Remember, it continues with Nehemiah, and we will look at that next time.

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