

“There Is Still Hope”

Ezra 9-10

July 19, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Earlier in Ezra, we read of a threat to Israel from outside. The people of the land opposed the rebuilding of the temple and sought to have it stopped. In these last two chapters, we read of a threat that is far more serious because it is internal. Ezra has now been back in Jerusalem for only four months and he receives a visit from a group of officials who brought some very bad news. **“The people of Israel 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”** (9:1-2). It is interesting that some of the people groups mentioned no longer existed. Most of the names in this list come from commands in Exodus and Deuteronomy (7:1-4), where God specifically forbids intermarriage with them. This is evidence that Ezra’s Bible teaching was being effective. These officials had been paying attention, and they observe a practice among the people that is at odds with God’s law. What made it even worse was the fact that the leading violators of God’s law were leaders among the Jews. **“And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost”** (9:2).

Have you ever had such a day like this day was for Ezra? Perhaps it’s that day when you happen to discover that your spouse has been opening credit cards without your knowledge to cope with some out-of-control spending. Or maybe there is some crisis with a child or at work. This was a day of crisis for Ezra. What is needed when we encounter such major crises in life? Apparently, Ezra needed to hear a message brought to him by another leader. It is a message we also need to hear. “There is still hope” (10:2). Discovery of sin is to be halfway to the solution already, and it is often the case that a crisis is a catalyst for such discovery. When the bad news comes and it feels like a punch in the gut, know that there is still hope. When you can’t sleep at night because of the bad news, know that there is still hope. Here’s what that hope looks like.

I. The Sin

We need to begin by understanding exactly what God was forbidding by this restriction on marriage. Some have used this to try to make the case that the Bible forbids interracial marriage. That is not what it means. What is being forbidden here is marriage to non-believers. Had one of these women become followers of Jehovah, there would have been nothing improper about such a

marriage. We know that there are several well-known women in the Old Testament who were not Jewish but who married Jewish men in lawful marriages. As a matter of fact, several of these appear in the ancestry of Jesus. One thinks of Tamar, a Canaanite resident who gave birth to a child fathered by Judah, one of Jacob's twelve sons. Or consider Rahab, another Canaanite from Jericho, or Ruth the Moabite woman who married Boaz. God is not against interracial marriage, but he is against marrying outside the faith. That is the sin involved here.

Why is God opposed to this? Verse 2 goes on to say, **“the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands.”** Other translations say, “the holy seed has mixed itself.” It's the same Hebrew word that appears in Genesis 3:15, where God places a curse on the serpent and says to him, **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.”** The assumption is that there will be a continual separation between these two seeds. Eventually, someone will come from the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. This, of course, refers to the Messiah, our Lord Jesus. So the seed of the woman must be preserved as distinct in order for God's redemptive purposes to be realized. The failure to do so would serve in time to obliterate this distinction, as the godly seed begins to embrace the idolatries of the ungodly seed.

Let's consider this from another angle. It is of crucial importance that God's people remain exclusively loyal to the Lord, steering clear of all idolatrous loyalties. We've just considered how important it is to God's redemptive purposes that the holy seed be preserved. It is also important to unbelievers, though they remain unaware of this importance. The importance is that the presence of God's holy people preserves the world from judgment. The Bible is clear in teaching that God's judgment comes upon the world not because of the sin of unbelievers but because of the sin of believers. The flood in Noah's day came for this very reason: the sons of God married the daughters of men (Gen. 6:2), with the result that the godly line began to disappear on the earth. God's people began to look exactly like the devil's people. Then consider Abraham's prayer for Sodom, asking God to stay his hand of judgment if only ten righteous people could be found there. God agreed and said that if ten righteous were there, he would not bring judgment. Judgment did come, and it was for the shortage of the righteous. I believe, too, that this is one of the truths taught in Jesus' well-known metaphor by which he says that his people are the salt of the earth. Salt in his day served to preserve meat from decay, and its main need was to maintain its saltiness, its distinctiveness.

The application to us is clear. We are to embrace our distinctives as God's holy people. Among other things, this means that believers should not marry unbelievers, which is clearly taught in the New Testament (2 Cor. 6:14). More broadly, it means that we must be vigilant always in our fight against idolatry. Our idols are different than the ones faced in Ezra's day, but they are no less

toxic to our relationship with God. We battle such idols as materialism, trust in technology, political power and college football. Idols always promise life and deliver pain and death. In the spring of 2000, a reality TV show aired titled *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* Thousands of women applied, all of whom were willing to marry this man whom they had never seen or talked to. They appeared before him and were judged solely on the basis of their beauty. Neither party seemed interested in such things as the religious beliefs of this prospective spouse or his or her character qualities. He wanted only a beautiful woman and presumably these women only wanted a rich husband. A woman named Darva Conger won, immediately married the millionaire, Rick Rockwell, and the two of them left for a honeymoon in Las Vegas. A week later, the marriage was annulled. Apparently, Mr. Rockwell didn't have as much money as he claimed. What's more, it was discovered that a former fiancée had filed a restraining order against him for abusive and threatening behavior. Such is the eventual outcome of all our idols. They promise much but deliver only pain, disappointment and slavery.

I introduced this point by talking about hope, and perhaps you are struggling to find any hope in what we've said so far. There is great hope in concluding that our problem is our sin of idolatry, for the simple reason that there is a solution to this problem. The solution, of course, is in the blood of Jesus. He came to forgive us for sin and to give us his power to overcome sin. If you conclude that your central problem is that you lack some ability or opportunity, there may be no solution for that. If your problem is your appearance, the things you might do to address that are limited. But if your main problem is correctly identified as sin, there is a complete remedy for that in Jesus. That brings us to our next point.

II. The Remedy

How do we avail ourselves of the remedy for sin that we have in Jesus? Ezra shows us the way, and it lies along the lines of repentance. Ezra's prayer, and the events that follow, have much to teach us about repentance. Our instincts concerning our sin are always misguided, and I note three such misguided tendencies that Ezra avoids.

Our first misguided tendency is to avoid awareness of sin at all costs. For example, defensiveness is a common way we do that. Another common sin-avoidance tactic is to turn the spotlight on the sin of others, followed by the smug attitude that says, "At least I'm not that bad." Note how Ezra did the opposite of that. When he was told of the sin of many in taking foreign wives, he didn't say, "I can't believe they would do that. I would never do anything like that." Instead, he prayed, "**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**" (9:6). Did you notice Ezra's

use of the first person plural pronoun, speaking of *our* iniquities and *our* guilt? Ezra hadn't taken a foreign wife. I would note that this is not uncommon in the Bible. We see it also in the prayers of Daniel and Nehemiah. We also see it in the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus teaches us to pray, **"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."** He doesn't say to pray, "Forgive me my sins." How could they pray like this and what is Jesus teaching us in the Lord's Prayer? When you see someone else's sin, which we are much better at seeing than we are at seeing our own sin, instead of saying "I'm glad I'm not like that," we should ask, "How am I like that?" Ezra could confess *our* guilt because he saw the same heart of sin in himself. It is likely that these marriages to foreign women were undertaken for political advantage. Israel was weak and poor at this point in their history. The people who had lived in the land for decades now were well-situated, and marriage to them would help secure Israel's future in the land. But to do so is to reveal an attitude of self-trust rather than trust in God. Ezra may not have entered into these marriages, but he saw the same temptation not to trust God in his own heart. So he was not afraid to see his sin and confess it.

Our second misguided tendency with our sin is to minimize it. "It's not that bad," we say. Or, "this is so common; everyone's doing it, so how could it be so bad?" Ezra believed it was so bad that he trembled, together with many others gathered around him. When he hears the news, he responded like this. **"I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled"** (v. 3). And then in his prayer he says that they are drowning in their guilt and iniquities, which have reached over their heads, up to heaven itself. Then he goes on to say that they have not learned from the past, for their ancestors committed the same sins (v. 7). Furthermore, this sin of idolatry was the very thing that led to the captivity. God had now been so gracious to them by restoring them from that captivity, and they are returning all over again to that same sin.

Was Ezra just a sadist who liked to make himself miserable by thinking of sin in such negative ways? Certainly not. One of the benefits of recognizing the greatness of sin is that by doing so we can avoid this third tendency of trying to fix it ourselves. Nowhere in his prayer does Ezra make any request of God. Nowhere does he propose a solution. He simply sets their sins before God and leaves it up to him. Notice how he closes. **"Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this"** (9:15). In Ezra's view, they are so broken that all he can do is to take the whole mess they have made of things and just bring it to God, trusting that he will know what to do.

Several years ago when I first started trying to do my own bicycle mechanic work, I had a problem that I tried to fix. In the process, I completely messed everything up, way beyond my ability to fix things. So I loaded up my bike and took it to a real mechanic who was able to sort things out relatively quickly. When I brought the bike to him, I didn't offer him any advice on what he

should do to fix it. I didn't offer to help in any way, because it had become clear to me that I was not the answer; I was the problem. We need to see our sin in a similar way, viewing it for what it is—something that has messed things up so badly that it is way beyond our ability to fix. But it is not beyond God's ability to fix. So repentance is when we turn to God like this, in complete dependence upon him to take our sin and make it better, forgiving us and changing us at a heart level. That brings us to our next point.

III. The Result

Many join Ezra in this repentance. But after they repent, they're not done. There have been consequences to their sin that need addressing. They have married unbelievers who will continue to draw their hearts away from the Lord. The prophet Malachi wrote at this time, and he indicates that many even divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry these pagan women. So Ezra tells them to put away their foreign wives.

This is a difficult passage because it seems to contradict what the apostle Paul commanded in 1 Corinthians 7 about a mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. There, Paul says that the believing spouse should not initiate a divorce. It is true that Paul is addressing a situation that was a little different, that of a marriage that became mixed as a result of the conversion of either the husband or wife, rather than one that was mixed from the beginning. But that doesn't completely resolve the difficulty. The only thing I can conclude is that there is some difference here that is not revealed to us in the text. In any case, it is clear that this was a matter of great significance to warrant such a significant response.

This does show us that the fruit of repentance is a willingness to do whatever is necessary to repair the damage done by our sin. There are times when the damage cannot be repaired, but in so far as it can the sinner should be willing to do whatever is required to do so.

CONCLUSION:

Are you in need of the message Ezra received in this passage? "There is still hope" (10:2). Know that your only hope lies with God, and it is through the often painful path of repentance. The crisis you are facing that has given rise to your need for hope is God's gracious call to you. There is still hope. Your hope is not in being able to fix others or even in your ability to fix whatever challenging circumstances you may be facing. Your only hope is in opening yourself to the work of the Spirit to see your sin, take it to God in repentance, and receive his abundant grace, forgiveness and healing.

Small Group Discussion Questions
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1. It was a very bad day for Ezra when he heard of the sin of the people in entering into unlawful marriages with pagan women. Even some of Israel's leaders were guilty of this. It was so bad that apparently Ezra was battling losing hope, so that another man, Shecaniah, needed to bring him a word of hope (10:2). What kind of crisis might have the same effect upon you, of causing you to lose hope?
2. Interact with this idea that such crises are often a catalyst for God's good work in your life. How might that be the case? Does that provide any help to you in ministering to others in crisis?
3. The Bible clearly forbids mixed marriages between believers and unbelievers, both here and elsewhere (see 2 Cor. 6:14). Why do you think that might be?
4. Notice Ezra's strong reaction to this sin. He trembled, tore his garments, pulled out his hair and sat appalled. How might you develop more of this kind of reaction to sin?
5. It was mentioned in the sermon that this text reveals three misguided tendency we have regarding our sin. They are to avoid awareness of sin at all costs through strategies like defensiveness and focusing on the sins of others, minimizing sin and trying to fix things ourselves. Which of these is the tendency to which you are most prone?
6. The holiness of God's people, the Church, is of paramount concern to God. Where do you think today's church most lack holiness?
7. A fruit of repentance is a willingness to remedy any damage done by your sin. Can you think of examples of that?