

EZRA 9, 10

January 11, 2010

Chapters 7-10 in the book of Ezra have to do with the ministry of Ezra. Although he probably wrote the whole book which carries his name, his name is not mentioned until we get to chapter 7. It appears in the first verse of chapter 7 where his genealogy is given back as far as Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. We learn also from 7:6 that “he was a ready scribe in the Law of Moses.” This meant that he was eminently qualified to do the work of a scribe, making copies of the Word of God. But he was not only a professional linguist, but he was a man deeply devoted to God and to the Word of God. See Ezra 7:10. And this fact is certainly brought out very forcibly in these last four chapters of the book of Ezra. He led a second group of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. A first group, we learn from chapters 1-6, had been led back to Jerusalem by Zerubbabel. The main purpose for both groups was the rebuilding of the Temple, including its adornments .

The first group went back to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Derek Kidner sets the date for the second group at 458 B.C., and that there were probably 60 years between chapters 6 (the end of the first division of the book) and chapter 7 (the beginning of the second). The second group was charged with the task of taking articles back which Nebuchadnezzar had defeated Israel. There were marauding bands of thieves in the open land between Babylon and Jerusalem, and so the task which faced Ezra was both difficult and dangerous.. He was hesitant about asking Artaxerxes for a military escort because he had confidently declared before the King that the Lord would take care of them. And so he proclaimed a fast at the river Ahava where returning exiles sought the blessing of the Lord, and were assured of it. And so they arrived safely, and their mission was completed.

But one of the most astounding details about the first six chapters, and then appearing again in chapter 8, was the way in which the Lord worked in the hearts of three Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, to release the Jewish exiles from Babylon, and then to finance their return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple there. They are, not just one, nor even two, but three illustrations of Proverbs 21:1:

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water, he turneth it whithersoever He will.

Undoubtedly when we come to the end of chapter 8, we have reached one of the highest points in Jewish history. But the joy of Ezra and the people was to be short lived. A widespread violation of the Word of God was soon discovered. And they had been doing it for at least sixty years! It is stated clearly in 9:1-2. (Read.)

In the outline that I have given you I have called this, “the Jews’ abominable sin – mixed marriages.” And this is the theme of these last two chapters.

There are three main points in these last two chapters:

1. Ezra's grief and his prayer (9:1-15).
2. The repentance of the people (10:1-17)..
3. The names of the offenders (10:18-44).

This was a very sad time in the history of Israel, but one thing I like about these chapters, especially chapter 9, is the prayer of Ezra. Ezra was a true shepherd of the sheep, and I know that one lesson that stands out at this time in his life, is that Ezra's first response when he heard what had happened in the lives of many of the Lord's people was to go to the Lord in prayer. And it is a wonderful prayer. But he suddenly went from a mountain peak of joy to the depths of sorrow. There is nothing that can stir the heart of a man of God greater than sin in the lives of His people. And Ezra, this man of God, was no exception. And there does not seem to be a very long period of time between the end of chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9. The bad news is in verse 1. (Read.)

9:1 It was that “the people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands.” It was not just a problem affecting a few people (that would have been bad enough), but it was generally true of all of the people, and even many of their leaders were charged with having been unfaithful to the Lord.

Please turn with me to Exodus 34:10-17, and then to Deuteronomy 7:1-11.

You will remember that the first commandment in the Law was, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). There were still, according to the latter part of this verse, remnants of the Canaanite nations in the land of Israel, and probably during Israel’s captivity, other heathen people had come into Israel’s land, and were there when the Jews returned. The ultimate danger that this caused was that all of these people were idolatrous, and by intermarriage with them, the heathen member of a marriage would by the very nature of evil, have more influence on the Lord’s people than the Lord’s people would have upon them. And this is what had happened in many, many cases. It is a fact of life because we are sinners by nature, that in practically all cases when a heathen and a child of God are united in marriage, the heathen, whether husband or wife, drags the child of God down, away from the Lord, and, as was the case with thousands of Israelites, they turned from the Lord to idols. In fact, this was one of the major reasons that God sent His people into captivity. And Ezra could immediately see that the people, in spite of the blessing of God, were laying the foundation for another captivity. Ezra knew that this was a basic failure that would not bring the blessing of God, but judgment.

9:2 Here we have the report of the princes as to what had already happened. Derek Kidner believes that these princes who reported to Ezra were acting as they did because of the effect that Ezra’s teaching of the Word was having upon them. And that seems a very logical assumption. When people are reading the Word and under the teaching of the Word they are always more sensitive to sin and to everything that is displeasing to God. What added to the tragedy was that even some of the other princes and leaders among the people were not only involved in this themselves, and seem to have been encouraging others to do so. When disobedience gets into the lives of the leaders of the Lord’s people, this has a great effect, the wrong effect, on those of the people who are not strong in the Lord. Obviously among the Jews, and is true in the professing church today, there are those who belonged to the nation, but did not belong to the Lord. It is always easier to go backward than forward, to go down than to go up. And it can affect the people of God of all ages. We dare not let our guard down through disobedience as long as we are in this life. We must never compromise with sin.

I am sure most of you are very familiar with such verses as Romans 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 and 1 John 2:15-17. But all of the Bible, OT and NT, is united in emphasizing obedience to the Lord, obedience to the commands of Scripture, as the only safeguard against sin and defeat. If we play with fire we are going to get burned.

Now what effect did this have on Ezra? Look at verse 3.

9:3 Everything that Ezra did here spoke both of his sorrow and his anger. The people obviously knew better than to do as they were doing. I like Matthew Henry’s comment on this verse. And I am sure that he (Matthew Henry) was right when he said that Ezra was particularly distressed because of the way the people had dishonored God. Here are his words:

It grieved him to the heart to think that a people called by His Name should so grossly violate His Law, should be so little benefitted by his favors.

And then MH continued by pointing to

the mischief the people had hereby done to themselves and the danger they were in of the wrath of God

breaking out against them (MH, II, p. 1059).

Disobedience to God not only dishonors God, but it has dire consequences for us especially if and when we do it repeatedly. And so we have two reasons for being concerned even about the sins of others. Ezra, a man whose heart was saturated with the Word of God was just as grieved for the sins of his fellow Jews as he would have been if it had been his own sin. The writer of Psalm 119, probably David, expressed our greatest safeguard against sin when he wrote, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa. 119:11).

The rending of clothes in OT times was a sign of grief. Cf. 2 Sam. 3:31. Pulling the hair out would cause excessive pain. Adam Clarke said, “All this testified Ezra’s abhorrence, not merely of the act of taking strange wives, but their having also joined them in their idolatrous abominations” (II, 748). Idolatrous practices were grotesque in the extreme – sexual immorality and perversion, the sacrifice of children, and on and on. Ezra marveled that the people of Israel would have gotten involved in such iniquitous practices. But no one can predict where anyone will eventually go and do who takes the first step toward idolatry. It is certainly basic to the keeping of all of the Law that no one even begins to turn from God as the only true God who alone is worthy of our worship.

9:4 In verse 3 we learn that others “assembled” with Ezra, and there is no evidence in the text that he called for others to come. They must have come because the Lord moved on their hearts, and they wanted to support Ezra in whatever he might do – because they were sure that he would do something. But they are also described as those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel.” This expression is synonymous with fearing God. They were Israelites who lived in awe of God, who treated Him as their God, and who wanted to please the Lord, which is not the way hundreds of Jews felt about the Lord. Again, these must have been people who had been greatly influenced by the life and teaching of Ezra. They were one in heart with him. One commentator mentioned that God is called here “the God of Israel” to distinguish Him from the gods of the heathen and to express the belief of the Jews who joined with Ezra that if God were your God, then you would not go the way of other people even though they might be considered “religious.”

Notice that those who assembled with Ezra believed that what those who had married heathen spouses were guilty of “transgression,” and they used a word which not only means sin, but serious sin, sin which leads to other sins. And it is significant also that Ezra in writing this account spoke of the fact that those who were guilty had been “carried away.” We move into the Devil’s territory, and then he takes over. People who live like the disobedient Israelites were living, never expected that they would be “carried away” into things that they never expected that they would do. They were, as the word suggests, not in control of their lives, but they had been carried away captive. The Lord Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever commiteth sin is the servant of sin” (John 8:34). And the word “servant” is δούλος, which is a bondservant. To play with sin is to move into bondage.

The word “astounded” is Old English for astonished, but it means to be stunned, to be devastated. Ezra was overcome with what many of the Jews had done. He found it difficult to believe that what had happened really happened.

“Until the evening sacrifice” – what does this refer to? It has to refer to the continual burnt offering. This was the burnt offering that was offered every morning, and again every evening. The burnt offering was the one sacrifice which was offered completely to the Lord. It was the way that the Lord had ordained that the people would begin the day with Him, and then end the day with Him, recognizing that they belonged to Him. It was a special time of fellowship with the Lord. Now there was no offering that God had established for deliberate sin. These disobedient Jews were in much the same dilemma that David faced when he went to the Lord about

the sins that he had committed. You probably remember that he said in Psalm 51:16, “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else I would give it. Thou delightest not in burnt offering.” There was no offering for adultery. There was no offering specified for murder. If there had been, David would have given it, or them. And there was no offering for idolatry. So Ezra had no hope for a sinning nation but in the mercy of God. I am sure that Ezra felt physically sick in body as well as sick in his soul. This was a major crisis for Israel to be guilty of sin abominable sin. To be guilty of the Law in one point, was to be guilty of all. This is what James wrote in chapter 2, verse 10, of his epistle: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” All throughout the history of Israel idolatry was a problem then to them. It is probably a greater problem today in America than we realize. And even if we do not bow down before an image of a god, there are things that become idols to us in our hearts, such as, money, sports, cars, boats, planes, power, positions, and so on. There are always idols in our lives that take the place which only the Lord should have. There is plenty for us to be astonished at even in the lives of those who claim to be the children of God. We all need to pray daily David’s prayer found in the last two verses of Psalm 139:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

24 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psa. 139:23-24).

9:5 When the time of the evening sacrifice had come, probably at sundown, Ezra got up, fell upon his knees, and lifted his hands to the Lord. I am sure that he rose up physically, but he emphasized that it was from what he said was, “my heaviness.” The margin of my Bible suggests the word *humiliation*. That is a good translation. The word also means *the affliction of himself*. It also carries with it the idea that he probably had been fasting from the moment that he was informed of what was going on in the lives of many of the people in Israel. We cannot say how long he had been totally quiet, incapacitated by the news that had reached his heart through his ears. He got on his knees and spread out his hands toward the Lord in an attitude of faith in God and expectation that He might hear him, and give the blessing which was so greatly needed. Ezra probably had never been lower in all of his life than he was at this moment. But then he began to speak, but his words were directed to God, to his God. And those who had assembled with him undoubtedly heard him as he poured out his heart to the Lord. His prayer occupies the remainder of chapter 9.

9:6 Ezra’s posture (see verse 5) as well as the tone of his entire prayer indicate how humbled he had been before the Lord. Notice how he addressed the Lord: “O my God.” It seems that Ezra knew that the only hope they had as a nation was in the sacrifice which was represented by the evening (and morning) sacrifices, the then future sacrifice of the coming Messiah Who would lay down His life for the sins of His people. He knew that because of the sacrifice which was represented by the morning and evening sacrifices, he could, by the grace of God, call God, “O my God.” Although Ezra was crushed and humiliated by the sin of the nation, he was not hopeless. Notice his mention of “grace” in verse 8, and “mercy” in verse 9. These same two words, “ashamed and blush” were used by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:19:

19 Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.

That is why MH said that “prayer may preach” (II, 1060). This surely must be one of the main reasons why we have so many prayers recorded in Scripture which were prayed by godly men and women. In prayer we turn to our knowledge of God and His Word for our hope when from a human standpoint there should be no hope. In his time of need Ezra turned to what he had learned from the Word of God as to how the people of God before him had addressed the Lord and had expressed their shame because of their sin. Ezra felt totally unworthy to come to God because of the greatness of the sin of Israel. The people had graciously been released from the captivity they had experienced because of their sin, and now they were guilty of committing the same sins which had brought about their captivity before. It was like Israel had exhausted the grace of God before, and now they had no reason to expect that forgiveness would be granted to them again. But, as grieved as Ezra was, he knew that we can never exhaust the mercy and grace of God. If he had not known this he would have

been in the greatest despair. He believed that the sins of Israel were piled up so that they reached “unto the heavens.” But he evidently also knew truth that is expressed in Psalm 36:5,

Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.

Julia Johnston has expressed this truth in what we have sung this morning, “Grace that is greater than all our sin.” When we are overwhelmed by our sin, how wonderful it is to know that we can never “outsin” the grace and mercy of God. If we could, none of us could ever have been saved.

So there is a lot of truth behind the first words of Ezra’s prayer: “O my God.” This is not to be a reason for us to continue in sin, but our hope that when we do, even committing the same sins, that there is always hope for our forgiveness in the infinitely valuable sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9:7 As Ezra looked back over the history of Israel, he saw that all of it was spoiled by what he called, “great trespass.” They had repeatedly been guilty before God. And their sins had included not only all of the people, but also their kings and their priests. And it was because of their sins that they had been delivered into the hands of foreign kings. Many in the nation Israel had died. The others were taken into captivity. What they had under the blessing of the Lord had been taken from them. And what made matters even worse was that the people themselves had become “the spoil” of their enemies. This had resulted in “confusion of face.” What did Ezra mean by that? It meant that the nation had been thoroughly disgraced. And Ezra may have been thinking about promises like we find in Isaiah 54:17:

17 No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.

The history of Israel had been far different from what the Lord intended for it to be, and the reason for such a disgraceful history, was their sin!

Can we read passages like this without thinking of our own nation, and ourselves? God has been very good to us, very faithful. But in an ever-increasing way we have turned more and more to our own way which has been, and still is, a sinful way. And even now if sin is mentioned as a cause of our troubles, or *the* cause of our troubles, it draws nothing but the greatest scorn from masses of our people. We can be thankful that it is not from *all* of us because today, as in Ezra’s day, God has a remnant who want to be faithful to Him and to His Word. And it is very important that we humble ourselves before God, that we confess whatever sins may be in our lives, and then forsake them.

9:8 Verse 7 had to do with the past; now in verse 8 Ezra recognized that “for a little space,” *i.e.*, time, “grace hath been shown us from the Lord our God.” They did not deserve what God had done for them in moving upon the hearts of the heathen kings to set them free, and then to bring them to Jerusalem safe and secure. Ezra attributed everything that he had recorded at that point in their history to the grace of God. They were free, not primarily because of what the Persian kings had done for them, but because it was God Who had worked on those kings to set the Israelites free. The Persian kings would not have done what they did if it had not been for the way God worked upon their hearts.

But what did Ezra mean that the Lord had not only secured their freedom, but that He had given them “a nail in His holy place”? This is, of course, a figurative expression which goes back to what the Lord said to his people about Eliakim in Isaiah 22:15-25. It has reference to the way in which utensils were hung on a nail, or peg, in the house of the Lord. And it speaks of a time like the Israelites were experiencing in Ezra’s day, when the Temple had been rebuilt, and the use of the Temple was again basic to the relationship of the people of Israel to their God. This is what God had done in Ezra’s day to “lighten” their eyes to give them “a little reviving” in their bondage. So it meant that the rebuilding of the Temple was a sign to the people from God

that they had again restored to the favor and blessing of God. It wasn't their doing, nor anything that they deserved, but it was totally God in His grace Who was reviving His people after the period of judgment that they had experienced in Babylon. So the nail spoke of permanence and security which Ezra was recognizing in his prayer to God, an expression of the hope that God had given them like the permanence of a nail, or peg, in the wall.

January 18, 2010

Dr. Keil in the K & D commentary series on the OT said, that the nail was the Temple. And he said,

This was to them a firm nail, by which they were borne and upheld; and this nail God had given them as a support to which they might cling, and gain new life and vigor (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 119).

We must remember that all the time that the Temple was being rebuilt, this intermarriage of the Jews and the heathen was taking place. It should have made people wonder why God would bless His people while at the same time they were living in such sin. This teaches us that the blessing of God upon any work or nation does not mean that those who are receiving the blessing are totally pleasing to God. The "little space" that Ezra referred to at the beginning of verse 8 was the time from the release of the first group of exiles to the arrival of the second group in Jerusalem. Ezra said that "now for a little space grace hath been showed from the Lord our God. The word "grace" suggests that God knew that the people did not deserve such a blessing, but it would also suggest that the Temple itself stood as evidence that although their group was just "a remnant" of what the nation once was, here is hope that even with their continuance in sin, there was hope for the future blessing of the Lord.

It should be noted that from the beginning of Ezra's prayer in verse 6 he started speaking of the sin of the people as "our" instead of *their*. Doubtless this sin of the people had made Ezra conscious of the fact that in connection with sin, no one was free from contamination, and that while the intermarriage of the people with the heathen was the main issue at hand, they all had need to search their own hearts to see what other sins they may have been harboring in their hearts.

That shows how godly Ezra was. None of us can point a finger at anyone else as though everybody is else is guilty except for me, or you. Ezra's knowledge of the Word had made him very conscious of sin, not just in the lives of others but in his own life. You will remember what Jeremiah the prophet said about sin in Jeremiah 17:9-10:

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

10 I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

That is why David prayed as he did in Psalm 19:14:

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

And in Psalm 139:23-24:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

24 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Notice that "the heart" is mentioned in all three of these verses I have just given you.

So when the Lord points to sin in our hearts, let us look for His nail, His encouragement to us, His hope that He will not cast us away. Philippians 1:6 is such a nail. Jude 24 and 25 are good nails. More nails are found in John 10:27-30. When you start to think in terms of nails, the Bible is full of them. What Joseph said to his brothers was a nail on which to hang their hopes.

Now let us move on to verse 9.

9:9 Here Ezra went on God about what they were. The verb “were” is not in the original, and most of the more recent translation think it ought to be “are.” Whatever should be the true reading, we do not know, but we can be sure it was one or the other. Both are true. They were bondmen in Babylon, but they obviously were still bondmen in Jerusalem, only the emphasis on Jerusalem would have been especially bondmen in sin!

But, thank God, that was not the end of the story for them, or for us! Ezra followed it up right away with “yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage.” Why could Ezra say this to the Lord? Read the rest of the verse. He “hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving.” This was the first thing that God had done. This included expenses for the trip back to Jerusalem. But that wasn’t all. Second, “to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof.” And there was more blessing yet to come. The last was yet to come: “And to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.” And the Lord did all of this knowing how greatly the people were sinning against him. This may not be a prediction of the future rebuilding of the walls, but some believe that Ezra was speaking of the way in which the Persian kings were securing the safety of the Jewish people even before the walls were built.

Remember the word “mercy” early in this verse. “Grace” in verse 8; “mercy” in verse 9. There is no other reason why God had so blessed His people even while they were knowingly sinning against Him; God knew it, and they knew it. And yet, haven’t we seen the same thing in our lives?

Now all that Ezra said in his prayer was not to lessen the very grievous sin of the people. It was to intensify their guilt and the need to repent. But in verse 10 Ezra asked God a question. And then he asked God two more questions in verse 14. And let us remember that the questions in the Bible are to be answered. This was a question that God was to answer, but Ezra was asking it for himself and for the people of Israel.

9:10 The question was: “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? Then notice what he said immediately afterwards: “For we have forsaken Thy commandments.” And be sure to notice that the word “commandments” is plural. This should remind us of what James wrote much later where he said in James 2:10:

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

We know that the Law said, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” And the second commandment said, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” Whether they had made graven images or not at this point, we do not know, but they had worshiped graven images. But we have also seen that in Exodus 34:10-17 and in Deuteronomy 7:1-10 they were forbidden to intermarry with heathen nations, either to take their daughters for their sons, or to give their daughters to their sons. So the Israelites were under a terrible load of sin, and the penalty for each of them was death.

What could they say? That they didn’t realize what they were doing? That would only have brought another charge against them. Could they say that they wouldn’t do it any more? But they had done it before, and that was one of the reasons for their captivity. Could they blame the heathen? Probably some of them had done that, but that will not stand in the court of heaven. We are all responsible for our own sins. We can’t pass the penalty for what we have done to others, even though they may have been partially to blame. There was nothing that they could say except, “I am guilty.” Was there then no hope of forgiveness? Remember the nail, in this case, the Temple. That was to be their assurance that God would not destroy the nation, nor abandon them because of their sin. Would God then overlook their sin? Would He forget it? Would He forgive them if they repented? Yes, He would forgive them, but it would be through that which was portrayed by the continual burnt offering – the promise of the Seed of the woman Who would bruise the serpent’s head. All OT sacrifices

were offered in anticipation of Him Who would come to be bruised for their iniquities, Who would secure their salvation by His death on the Cross. The only hope of forgiveness for any sinner is in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Who came “to put away sin,” forever, I may add, “by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb.9:26b). How much the exiles understood this, we do not know. But Ezra understood that regardless how the Jews might have to suffer for their sins, it was always, always, always true, that they would never suffer as much as they deserved to suffer. See verse 13.

9:11 Why did God give the Israelites the commandments that He gave them? It was for their safety because they lived in an evil world, and the particular land, as glorious as it was outwardly, was a land unclean and filthy with the pollutions of man’s sin. The Canaanites were in the land, which was synonymous for saying that the land corrupted and could corrupt Israel, which it did.

In the same way, why we have all of the commandments of the Word, especially in the NT. Because we, too, live in a fallen, corrupt world. Remember the verses that I read to you from Romans 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 1 John 2:15-17.

If you were collecting the verses that have to do with the total depravity of the human race, Ezra 9:11 would have to be on your list. See Gen. 6:5; Psa. 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Isa. 53:6; Rom. 1:20-32; Eph. 2:1-3, and many more.

9:12 A good title for verse 12 would be, *The Reasonableness of God*. There were very strong reasons why the Lord told the Israelites that there were not to intermarry with the heathen. It was not because He was trying to keep them from being happy. No, it was because He wanted them to experience true joy. And the Lord knew that if they were left to themselves, they would make all of the wrong decisions. We would be like children who are allowed to do whatever they want to do. If you raise your children like that, you are asking for all kinds of trouble. You are raising a little demon. The Bible says that if you don’t discipline your child, you hate him. See Proverbs 13:24. In Psalm 19:18 we are told that “the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.” God has a reason for everything that He has told us to do, and He has a reason for telling us everything that we are not to do. There are times when we think we can get by if we do what is wrong according to the Bible, but if you do, you will find that the Bible is right, and you are wrong. In the case of the Israelites (and it is true of Americans too) that if you do one wrong thing, it leads to another, and another, and another. If you marry someone who is not a true Christian, don’t be surprised if you find yourself going his or her way instead of your way.

9:13 Notice in this verse that Ezra does not hesitate in calling sin, sin. He calls what they had done, “our evil deeds,” and “our great trespass,” and “our iniquities.” And as severe as God’s judgments had been upon them, Ezra said, “Thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve.” And the next chapter is going to tell us that there were a lot of the Jews who agreed with him. My folks believed in applying the board of education to the seat of knowledge. My Dad had a standing rule that if he got home from work, and found out that our mother had had to give any of us a licking, he gave us another one. I thought it was pretty tough in those days, but as I have gotten older I have been heard to say that I didn’t get as many spankings as I deserved. And I will tell you that I had the best Dad and Mom that any son could have. And I am more thankful to the Lord than I can say for the parents that He gave me. They were the best. They cared about what I did, and they wanted me to do the right thing. Unfortunately I didn’t always do it, but it was not their fault.

Ezra was expressing his repentance when he said to the Lord that he deserved more punishment than he had gotten. He really believed that. I am sure that Ezra had had hard days in Babylon. Those were difficult years for him, but they had been the making of him. We don’t see what he used to be, but we see what he became, as he has indicated, by the grace and mercy of God. My folks disciplined me because they loved me, and they

were doing what God wanted them to do when they punished me. But I know that they prayed for me as long as they lived. The Lord has had to discipline me many times, but never has He disciplined me as much as He could have.

But now let us look at verse 14. He was stating before God a warning that he had learned from the OT which was so precious to him. And, by the way, the Bible can teach us a lot of things that, if we learn them from the Word, we won't have to learn them in actual experience.

9:14 What was it that Ezra had learned? He had learned that, if they continued to break the Lord's commandments, to join with people who did what is abominable to God, God could increase His judgments until not even a remnant was left like they had in those days. Of course God never abandons His eternal purposes. He never takes salvation away from any of us. But there is such a thing as sin unto death. What is the sin unto death? It can be any sin, but sin which is repeated over and over when God has been dealing with His people about it. Sometimes it happens to people who are not Christians, and who have no fear of the Lord. This verse tells us what Ezra was thinking. His thought was that God had judged them with the Babylonian captivity, and they had been taken into exile for seventy years. Then He had secured their release through the Persian kings. But as soon as they got back to Jerusalem they were doing the very things that caused God to judge them the first time. Now Ezra was thinking, What if this happens again? If the Lord forgave them, would they do it again? And Ezra knew that there was a strong possibility that they would. And so he asked the question that we have in this verse. (Read verse 14.)

How did he answer his own question which he had directed to God?

9:15 We see into the heart of Ezra all through this prayer, but especially in this verse. His eyes were upon the Lord. And having considered the history of Israel before the exile, in their exile, returned from exile, only to see the people back to the sin which had caused their exile in the beginning, he took comfort in the fact that God was righteous. The people weren't, but God was! His dealings with them had stamped that great truth on Ezra's heart forever. God was righteous in all that He had done, but the same was not truth of Israel. They had been delivered from exile, but not from their sin. As a result, he was still on his knees as when he first began his prayer, and he felt that he could not stand before God "because of this."

If you want to see a man truly humbled before God, so humbled before God *that the unique thing about this prayer is that it ended without Ezra bringing a single request before the Lord*. He probably felt unworthy to ask the Lord to do anything for them. But he trusted the Lord so completely that he was willing to leave their case in the Lord's hands. Perhaps he had learned from the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah, and encouraged to trust the Lord, saying, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). There were not even ten righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, including Lot and his family. The Lord knew the burden on Abraham's heart, and so we read in Genesis 18:26 that when God destroyed those two cities for their great sin, that "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt."

Ezra did not feel worthy even to ask the Lord to spare Israel, but He knew that God was righteous and that He could be trusted to do what was right. The first part of chapter 10 tells us how God answered Ezra's prayer.

I am afraid that we often hurry into the Lord's presence by prayer, hastily lay a multitude of requests before Him, and then go. It shows how much we lack being like Ezra. Perhaps that is one reason that we don't see more answers to prayer than we do. Ezra felt that the Lord had been so good to His people in spite of their sin, that he did not feel worthy to present a single request to the Lord. But the Lord knew Ezra's heart, and

obviously was deeply pleased with Ezra who had not turned from the Lord, but had stood with his people as though he was as guilty as they were. What an example this is of Psalm 37:3, 4, 5, and 7 – “Trust . . . Delight . . . Commit . . . “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.”

Ezra the ready scribe who prepared his heart to seek the Lord probably knew as much about the OT as any man throughout those OT years, and he can teach us a great deal about walking with God and about how to pray. Let us make sure that we are learning all that the Lord is pleased to teach us.

January 25, 2010

In our outline, under the ministry of Ezra which is covered in chapters 7 through 10 we have been learning, in chapters 9 and 10, about how Ezra dealt with the sin of those Jews who had violated the Law by marrying heathen Gentiles. It broke Ezra’s heart, and he expressed his grief in chapter 9 which we have just concluded.

Now, in the beginning of chapter 10, in the first seventeen verses, we learn about the repentance of the people.

10:1 This is probably the same assembling that is mentioned in chapter 9, verse 4. The repetition points to how important this was in the mind of Ezra, and in the heart of God. It is God Who gives repentance (2 Tim. 2:25). And so I repeat what I said when we considered 9:4, that the voluntary coming of the people to Ezra was an indication that God was already at work in their hearts. Often when even God’s people are confronted with the sinfulness of their sin, they will argue, and usually go away, rather than acknowledging their sin. This was evidence that the people who are mentioned at the end of this chapter had already been convicted of their sin, and were repentant.

But let me raise the question: Why is sin such a problem to people, even to saved people? There are several reasons:

- 1) Because it is still a part of our nature to sin. We are naturally attracted by sin, and inclined to sin.
- 2) We live in a world that is dominated by “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” Everybody is sinning, and if you take a stand against sin, most often you will be ridiculed for it. On the other hand, one of our past Presidents said, “I did it because I could.” The opportunity was there, and he couldn’t resist it. I am sure that this was a big factor among the Jews. Other Jews were marrying, and God did not punish them, so why shouldn’t I do what they were doing. And soon hundreds of them were doing it.
- 3) As Christians we are inclined to think that we can “handle” it. But our experience, and the experience of others shows that we can’t handle it. If we play with fire, sooner or later we are going to get burned. We must never underestimate the power of temptation.
- 4) With the Israelites in Ezra’s day, it may be that there was widespread neglect, and even ignorance, of the Bible. When even Christians neglect the reading of the Word, or neglect the hearing of the Word, their guard against sin is lowered. They begin to think the wrong things, and say the wrong things, and read the wrong things, and do the wrong things. God did a wonderful thing for the second group of exiles who came out of Babylon by giving them Ezra, a man of the Word, as their leader. I still remember very well the words which the parents of a very close friend of mine had printed on the front of a Bible they gave to him: “This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.” Our consciences are not nearly as strong as they need to be if we are not in the Word daily – or better, many times daily! Bible reading and Bible teaching will strengthen us against sin.

We need to learn about sin from our Bibles, not by experiencing sin. The sins of the people caused Ezra to

weep bitterly over their sins, and his prayer caused many of the people to weep. Ezra said here in verse 1 of chapter 10 that “the people wept very sore.” Sometimes we weep for joy, but the weeping of the Israelites at this time was at the other end of the spectrum. They moaned with grief and sadness. There is no sorrow like the sorrow of grieving over things which cannot be undone. God forgives our sins when we repent, but the memory lingers, in part so that we will not repeat what we have said, done, or thought.

Note that Ezra called his prayer in chapter 9 a confession. He did not ask for forgiveness probably because he did not feel that he and the people were worthy of it. Even though Ezra was not guilty, yet he felt deeply responsible as their leader. It speaks volumes concerning the godliness of Ezra that he was so convicted of the sin of the people, and that he took his place of being guilty before God because of his position over them.

Most of you have heard my story of the man who went to sleep as his pastor was preaching, and the pastor told the deacon who was sitting next to the man who was sleeping to wake him up. And the deacon responded by saying, “You wake him up; you put him to sleep.” Maybe we as pastors are responsible for putting more people to sleep spiritually than we would like to admit. What pastor wants to answer the charge, “You put him to sleep.” I am sure that it is hard to describe what was going on in Ezra’s heart without being the godly man that Ezra was.

10:2 It is impossible to positively identify which Shechaniah this is because there are several mentioned in the OT. But his words may indicate that he was as innocent of this sin of intermarriage with heathen women

as Ezra was. Notice that he called it all *a sin against the God he called “our God.”* It is when we see our sin in that light that we are more inclined to confess it. You probably remember that when David was confessing his sin in Psalm 51, the sins of adultery and murder, that he said, “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight” (Psa. 51:4a). He had sinned against Bathsheba. He had sinned against her husband, Uriah. He had sinned against his nation, his people. But he was most conscious that his sin had been against God Who had witnessed all that David had done. Solomon wrote later that “the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). Remembering God is one of the greatest preventives against sin that there is. He sees what we do, watches where we go, hears what we say, knows even what we think. Shechaniah had it right. *The sin of the people had primarily been against God.*

There is no evidence that Shechaniah was a priest, nor prince, but he was just one of the nation who spoke out in support of Ezra, condemning them all for what they had done, and yet expressing the fact that there was hope when, humanly speaking, there should have been none because it had to be that the people had committed a presumptuous sin. That is when we commit a sin, knowing that it is a sin. The Law made no provision for forgiveness of such sins. And yet Shechaniah was right in saying that there was hope. David should have died for either and both of the sins which he committed. This was one reason why Ezra, in reviewing the past history of Israel, said, in verse 13 of the previous chapter that “our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve.” And He has blessed us too, far beyond anything that we deserve. And so, Shechaniah was right when he said, “Yet now there is hope.” What did he say that they must do?

10:3 The men had sinned against God, so the first thing that they needed to do was to get right with God. Shechaniah did not think that they should merely confess their sins, but then go right on with their relationships as husbands and wives. That relationship must be broken between the men and their wives, but also with the children which had been born in those marriages. This may have been easy to say, but it would not have been easy to carry out. The men may have had a true love for their wives, as well as for their children. But in most cases, we must assume, that the wives had not given up their idolatry, and so such relationships could not continue with the blessing of the Lord.

When you go back and read Exodus 34:10-17 and Deuteronomy 7:1-11 you can see the dire warning which the Lord had issued to the people for their disobedience in not destroying all of the Canaanite people, especially when their presence in the land was an open door for the Israelites to fall in love with the Canaanites and then be led into idolatry. The guilty parties faced the real possibility of death.

This whole passage raises a lot of questions with me, and I am sure that it does with you. But one thing that it does teach us is that there can be no compromise with sin. I have reviewed with you how it is that sin is an ever-present evil in this world. One sin leads to another, as it was with David. And the farther people go in sin, the deeper they go, and the less likelihood there is that they will ever get out. There are a lot of questions that are not answered in this passage. For example, what should a Jewish man do if his heathen wife would turn to the Lord? Could the relationship be carried on? We don't have the answer to that question. Also, some would ask, Would it not have been better for the fathers to keep the children to raise them in the faith? Again, we don't have the answer. We do know that there is always a very strong bond between a mother and her children, so it would seem that there would always be a tendency for the children to go back to their mother.

We have to fall back upon the sovereignty of God, and the righteousness of God – as Abraham said, “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” And we need to think of the doctrine of election. From before the foundation of the world, those who are to be saved, were chosen, ordained for salvation. So there must have been some exceptions to all that was done.

But it seems to me that we need to take the primary message which is very obvious in this passage, and that is that there can be no compromise with sin. Our Lord spoke some words while He was here on earth that may apply to this passage in Ezra. I am referring to Matt 10:32-39:

32 Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.

33 But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

34 Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

35 For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

36 And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

38 And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

39 He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

These are not easy words to accept. Just because one member of a family, or several members of a family, are elect, we cannot assume that all are elect. I think in most cases they are, but there is always the possibility that one or more may not be.

We learn from the two passages in the Law of Moses that deal with this kind of a situation, that God was making a covenant with his people when He warned them about the Canaanites. A covenant in a situation like this was a strong promise, a vow. Now Shechaniah suggested to Ezra and the people of Israel that they make a covenant with God, a strong promise, an exceptional promise, a vow. It was all of this because it was going back to the will of God as had been revealed in the Law of Moses. Only those would do this who had learned “to tremble at the commandment,” as they said, “of our God.” This, of course, is the equivalent of fearing God.

We may be looking here at a servant of the Lord who was at the point of despair. So widespread was the sin of the people, that Ezra may have feared that the people had crossed the line between God's patience and His wrath.

How good it was that the Lord had Shechaniah there to encourage Ezra. We need to remember that the strongest of God's servants is always liable to discouragement, and even despair. How good it is of the Lord to have His Shechaniah's on the scene to minister to His servants.

10:4 These are Shechaniah's words to Ezra, which the Lord had used Shechaniah to deliver the message. So in reality it was God speaking to Ezra.

10:5 We can be sure that Ezra did not realize that he had the support that he had. It appeared to be unanimous among the leaders and the people. It is obvious that God was at work. He always is when His people are responsive to the will of God as expressed in His Word.

10:6 Even though it was apparent that Ezra had the support of the chief priests and the Levites (see v. 5), yet that was not enough for him. He went to the temple and to the chamber of the high priest where he fasted, and mourned, and prayed. It is wonderful to have the support of the Lord's people, but that is no substitute for the support of the Lord. So, again, we see Ezra's dependence upon the Lord which he sought, in this case, in the Temple.

10:7 After this we are told that "they made a proclamation," apparently referring to Ezra, the princes, the elders, the priests and the Levites. It was that everyone was to go to Jerusalem within three days. No time was to be lost in doing the will of God.

10:8 If there were any who did not obey this proclamation, his possessions were to be taken from him, and he was to be excommunicated from the rest of the people. This shows how very important this all was to Ezra and the leaders of the people.

10:9 The people came in three days, which made it very crowded in Jerusalem. And to make matters even worse, there were heavy rains at this time, and it was cold. It was almost like the Lord was frowning upon what the people were doing. It may have been very discouraging to some of the people, but when it comes to the Word of God or the weather, there is no question but that the Word of God must have the precedence.

10:10 At this point Ezra, as the priest, spoke again. He told them what they had done that was so displeasing to God. They had transgressed against the Lord by taking strange wives, *i.e.*, women of the Canaanites and from other people who were then living in the land of Israel.

Malachi tells us of another situation among the Jews which, if anything, was more grievous to the Lord than the men who had taken heathen women as their first wives. It was this, some Jewish husbands had abandoned their Jewish wives, and taken heathen wives. We read about this in Malachi 2:11-17:

11 Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god.

12 The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the Lord of hosts.

13 And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand.

14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth,

against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.
15 And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.

16 For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

17 Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?

10:11 Ezra here was addressing the people individually. If we sin individually (as they had), then confession must be made individually. And to show the sincerity, the reality of their confession, individually they were to separate themselves from the people of the land and from their heathen, or strange, wives.

10:12 The people did as they had said in the previous verse what they would do.

10:13 However, there was a problem. There were so many who had married strange wives that there was no way they all could obey the Lord in a day, or even two or three days.

10:14 The solution was to assign men to certain times when they were to come and put away their wives. There must have been some official work done to make their separation complete.

10:15 Here the main men are mentioned who were in charge of this whole work.

10:16 Ezra and some men who were called “chief of the fathers” checked everything to make sure that it was all done officially.

10:17 This was all completed in ten days.

In the remainder of the book of Ezra (**10:18-44**) we have the names of the offenders.

Matthew Henry made several valuable observations that are worth remembering as we conclude our study of this important OT book. The first is: “Our weeping for other people’s sins may perhaps set them weeping for themselves, who otherwise would have continued senseless and remorseless.” And then this: “Then there is hope for people when they are convinced not only that *’tis good* to part with their sins, but that *’tis indispensably necessary*.”

Wordsworth reminds us that “prayers and tears avail not without practice.”

God measures our love for Himself and His Son by our daily conformity to His eternal Word. These were hard days in Israel, but necessary days in order for the blessing of the Lord to continue. How sad that they did not!