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**C1326 – July 31, 2013 – Ezra 9:1-15**  
**Pagan Inter marriages**

Last week we watched as Ezra and fellow exiles prepared for the return along a very dangerous desert highway littered with criminals and bandits waiting in ambush. Because Ezra had revealed to the king that his God was able to protect them from any danger he did not request a military escort but rather proclaimed a fast and beseeched the Lord for traveling mercies. The danger was heightened by the fact that they were transporting \$165 million in gold, silver and precious items. Twelve men took on the responsibility of weighing out the sum, recording all the details and transporting the money to the Temple. When they arrived they rested for three days and then took all the money to the temple, weighing it out in the presence of those who would later be discovered as chief among those in apostasy from Torah. Then they offered sacrifices to the Lord and delivered the king's edict to the surrounding government officials, establishing Ezra's executive power.

Tonight in Ezra the story begins to climax rapidly. Everything up to this point has been preparing us for this climax. He spent chapters 1-6 reciting how God had worked on the exiles behalf from 538-515BC through Gentile kings and Jewish prophets in order to return to the land and rebuild the Temple in the midst of enemy opposition. He spent chapters 7-8 detailing how God's past work connected with His present work in 458BC through Gentile kings and himself, a Jewish scribe, to return and restore the exiles who had apostatized from the Torah. Unbeknownst to him his nation was heading into apostasy; all he knew was that the king was concerned about the Greek navy on his western front and that the king was sending him to procure the favor of the God of Jerusalem. When he arrives it's not going to be long before he discovers some sin problems. And recall that when he returns he's returning as an *auslander*, an outsider, he's a Jew but he's not a local Jew, he's been living in Babylon, out among pagan Gentiles. So it's

going to be interesting to see how an *auslander* deals with a sin problem among the local natives. Fortunately God did know what he was going to face and had prepared him spiritually for the task by giving him a heart desire to study, to practice and to teach the Torah. What happens here in the next few weeks is what led to the Jews referring to Ezra as “the second Moses,” he holds a high place in Judaism because of his return and restoration of the Jews to Torah.

Ezra 9:1, **Now when these things had been completed**, that is, the arrival, the weighing out of the silver and gold in the Temple, the offering of sacrifices and the establishment of Ezra’s executive authority, then **the princes approached me**. Actually there’s a passage of time here of four months and seventeen days. They had arrived on the first month of the fifth day and this report came on the seventeenth day of the ninth month (cf 7:9 with 10:9). And so what’s happened is these **princes** had now been in their new posts for about five months; these were the men Ezra had appointed to judge according to the Torah, and now they’d been holding court for five months and seen case after case and one of the things that came to light in these cases was what they said right here in verse 1, **“The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. 2For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.”** In other words, they detected that illegal marriages had occurred. How did they detect them? It’s not like the girls went around with signs on their foreheads saying “I’m a pagan.” So how did they know? Apparently because verse 1 they were handling cases that involved **abominations**. What are abominations? Well, they’re detestable acts like human sacrifices, bestiality, homosexuality, false dealings in business and so forth; there are a whole series of things that are detestable in the sight of God. How did they know they were detestable? Because they knew the Torah; the first five books of the OT which constitutes the Law. It was the constitution that governed the nation Israel. It is the only constitution on earth ever given directly by God and so it is a revelation of

God's will for that nation's life, how he wants them to live. This constitution was to make them holy, distinct from all the other nations round about.

One of the laws these princes realized was being broken in verse 2 was an abomination. **For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands.** The abomination seems to be one of intermarriage, in particular intermarriage with pagan Gentile girls. Why was this a problem? Let's go back to the original statute in Deut 7. Deut 7:1 introduces the statute these judges realized was being violated. This statute was given pre-Joshua which is pre-Conquest so this is looking ahead to the time when they would enter and conquer the land. The land is the promised real estate, promised by God in the Abrahamic Covenant and repeated to Isaac, Jacob and the Twelve Tribes. So their ultimate inheritance of the land is a foregone conclusion based on the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. However, their enjoyment of the land was conditioned on obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. If they obeyed the laws in the Mosaic Covenant then they would be blessed in the land, if they disobeyed they would be cursed and exiled from the land. It was a conditional covenant. Here's one of the conditions, verse 1, "When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, 2and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them." This is the first and most important command to follow, "you shall utterly destroy them." Technically the Hebrew means "devote them to the ban," the charem, from which we get "harem." The harem was a special set of women designated only for the king and if you weren't the king you couldn't do anything with them. They were off limits. And what this is saying is that the conquered people in the land belong to God, the great king, they were therefore "under the ban," meaning they belonged to Him and you had to do what He said with them, you didn't have any rights to do with them as you pleased. They belonged to Him and He said do what with them? "utterly destroy them." What does that mean? It means destroy men, women, children, animals, destroy it all. Needless to say it's a controversial section of Scripture. Why would God do this to these innocent men, women, children and animals? Answer, they're not innocent. Nobody is innocent. Nobody

deserves to live on the earth. In short, what we have here is the ethics of final judgment being invoked, these nations listed had been piling up their sins and they had reached their fullness and it was time to judge. So temporarily the ethics of common grace were suspended in order to give the human race a peek into the ethics of final judgment that are coming. People forget that grace is limited in its expression. We live in a day of grace but eventually the day of grace will have run its course and judgment will ensue. You may never have thought of that but that's true. We already have historical precedent outlined here as the procedure for when the Jews entered the land. Utterly destroy them. Now if they had just done that none of the rest of verse 2, 3, 4 and 5 would even be necessary. But did they do that? Did Joshua in the conquest utterly destroy all these nations in the land? No. So then what. Verse 2b, "You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them." Did they obey this? Did they make covenants with them? Joshua was tricked into thinking the Gibeonites were from another land and so he made a treaty with them. Had he known they were from within the land he never would have made that treaty, but he did. What's the other thing in verse 2b they were to avoid? Showing "favor to them." The Hebrew word for "favor" is grace or pity. It means you feel sympathy for these people. Imagine totally annihilating men, women, children and cattle. How does that settle with you? Naturally you feel sympathetic. God is saying in advance, "Don't feel sympathetic" because if you do you won't be able to utterly destroy them. "Furthermore," verse 3, and here's where we find the particular statute they were violating in Ezra 9, "you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons." What were they supposed to do to these people? Utterly destroy them. The last thing they were supposed to do was intermarry with them. Did they do this? You bet they did. Who was the great king of Israel who did this? Solomon. Solomon did it *en masse*. He loved many foreign women, he married the daughter of Pharaoh, he married Moabite women, Ammonite women, Edomite women, Sidonian women and Hittite women, all women from nations that the Lord said, "do not associate with them. Why? Verse 4, "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you." When you read that what fundamentally is the reason they weren't supposed to marry these nice Gentile girls? There's a movement in these verses from one thing to another thing. What is it? From God to idols. So what's the issue? Is the issue Gentile girls? No, not really. Gentile girls are in

the line of Christ. Rahab was a Gentile girl. Ruth was a Gentile girl. So is the problem Gentile girls? Not really. What's the issue then? The theology of the Gentile girls. If you marry a Gentile girl you're getting more than the girl, you're getting the theology of the girl and this is going to corrupt your view of God. What did it do to Solomon? It corrupted his view of God; he went after all sorts of other gods; he built high places for all his wife's gods, he burned incense and sacrificed to these gods. Why did he do that? So he could get along with them. My goodness, try living in a house with a spouse that fundamentally disagrees with you on every issue. It's not going to be a very peaceful house. And you're going to get so tired of the mess you're going to compromise your beliefs. That's why it's so important to marry someone who shares the same fundamental beliefs. At root you must share the same beliefs about God, about man, about nature, about sin, about suffering, about judgment, about salvation, about election, justification and faith, about the substitutionary blood atonement. There are fundamental things that you must agree on or else it's going to be a wreck because out of those things come all the issues of life and if you can't agree on the root level about these things then every other issue in life is going to be a disagreement. So God said, "Jewish parents, don't give your sons and daughters to pagan Gentiles because if you do they'll turn away from Me and to idols and then you're really going to have a problem on your hands because I'm going to become angry and I'm going to destroy you! So just do what I said in the first place and destroy them."

What was going on now that Ezra and his entourage had returned? They were intermarrying with pagan Gentile girls. What was already happening as a consequence that God said would happen? They were turning aside to idols. What was God's temperament like? He was angry. That's why He raised up Ezra in the first place, to go back and confront this abomination so it could get corrected. So at this point in Ezra 9:1 he finally learns the main reason he's been sent back, there are serious issues involved. Indeed, notice the end of verse 2, **the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.** The leadership were apostate. In fact they were leading the way. That's why God had to bring an outsider, all the insiders' were corrupt, so an outsider has to come in and deal with the situation.

Verse 3 we get Ezra's response. **When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.** Now the first part there about tearing your **garment** and **robe** was pretty typical of godly people in the OT when they found out about sin. It was something worth mourning over. But pulling out your **hair from your head** and **beard** was a sign of extreme grief and disgust over sin. Ezra was extremely sensitive to sin and it's repercussions. He didn't take sin lightly. He knew. He saw sin against the backdrop of God's holiness and therefore as something deserving of death. So when he heard about it he was **appalled**. The Hebrew word means "to have an inner feeling of desolation due to the prospect of divine judgment." He knew what these intermarriages meant. They meant God was angry and they were on the path of His destruction! Now I wonder how many people in the church today are this sensitive to sin; how many experience intense grief over it; how many are appalled by it because they recognize that the church is right on the path of divine judgment. Take, for example, the wholesale acceptance and endorsement in the church of homosexual marriage. How many of us have intense grief over this practice in the church? Not many. Most just re-interpret the text to justify these sinful practices and give hearty approval to those who do them. We ought to be metaphorically tearing our garments and pulling the hair from our head. We ought to be appalled. Ezra was appalled. The local leadership was leading the way in this disaster and no doubt justifying their sinful practices by some seemingly rational explanation. Perhaps they argued that there were not enough women for the men as we saw earlier in Ezra 2 and therefore they were forced to marry pagan women. It sounds good on the surface but what did Isaac do when there was no one from his tribe around to marry? His father said, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan." So he sent his servant to find a distant relative. So the precedent had already been set. They should have sent for Jewish wives from other parts of the Persian Empire. But they had not and now corruption was in the highest ranks of the leadership and therefore the Ezra and his leadership were sent in to correct the corrupt leadership.

Now whether you realize it yet or not God's covenant purposes are seriously threatened right here. God had covenanted with Abraham and David to protect the kingly line that would ultimately come to rest on the Messiah. The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, in the land of Judea. And yet if

this problem is not corrected then God said He would destroy them. So this was very serious. Ezra realized how serious it was as we can tell from his prayer. But the gravity of the situation is far beyond what the average person sitting in the pew imagines. So while he is sitting appalled, notice verse 4, **Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.** The evening offering was about three o'clock. He sat down probably sometime in the morning and **everyone** who saw him **who trembled at the words of the God of Israel...gathered to him** to sit down in shock with him. Do you think these people are serious about the word of God? What's your analysis of their reverence for the word of God? They're trembling. The Hebrew word means they're afraid. What are they afraid of? The words of God. What had God said in his word in Deut 7 would happen if they engaged in pagan intermarriages? They would turn aside unto idols and His wrath would be kindled such that they would be destroyed. They're afraid they're going to be destroyed. They understand that they have no legal right to remain in existence.

Now had these who trembled at the word of God sinned in this manner? No, these people actually feared God and kept His commandments. But it's interesting because in verses 5ff they assume some responsibility. Collective responsibility is difficult for those of us in the West to conceive since we think in terms of individual responsibility. It's one of our weaknesses theologically. We struggle, for example, to grasp how we are held guilty for Adam's sin. I didn't eat the forbidden fruit so why am I held guilty? You see the weakness, we don't tend to identify with the sins of other individuals, we just concern ourselves with ourselves. But the Scriptures present the concept of collective responsibility. For example, in the seven letters to the seven churches of Rev 2-3 most of the churches had some sin problem caused by an individual or faction. In confronting these the Lord Jesus Christ exhorts the entire congregation to do something about it or else He's going to wipe that church out of existence! There is some collective responsibility for an individual's sin. We are not isolated lone islands, we are part of a larger organism. In the same way in the OT Israel was a national entity, what one did affected all. Therefore God wasn't going to strategically send a lightning bolt on each individual involved in the sin and spare the rest. He was going to judge them all, collective judgment.

Therefore you find these great prayers of confession by one on behalf of all in the OT. Much like the prayer of Daniel on behalf of his sin and the sin of his nation in Daniel 9 so here the prayer of Ezra on behalf of his sin and the sin of his nation. Observe verse 5, **But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;** here we have a prayer posture taken, he gets up from his **humiliation**, which is a word for a “fast,” he’s been fasting from morning to evening. He gets up from the fast and without changing his **garment** or **robe** he takes on a prayer posture on his **knees**, his **hands** or rather “palms” stretched out toward heaven. In this position he **said** verse 6, and here we want to highlight the greatness of this prayer. This is one of the great prayers of Scripture that we should model our prayers after. It’s a prayer of confession so we learn some of the proper elements of a prayer of confession and we’ll point those out as we go through.

First of all, verse 6 records the proper attitude in confession. **“O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.** He’s looking at a great big pile of sin that had grown so large it’s now right up in God’s face. They had smeared a great big pile of dung in God’s face. That’s the picture and that’s why he’s **ashamed and embarrassed**. You’d be ashamed too if you were staring up at God through this big heap of dung at which point you’re just hoping there’s still a channel through which He can hear your prayer as it wanders through the pile of vaporous stench. What an embarrassing moment and this is a man who hasn’t personally contributed much to the pile, but he has contributed, everyone has contributed, no one is exempt from their sinful input.

Had the nation done this before? Had they piled up a great big pile of sin between themselves and God? Ezra recalls, verse 7, **Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hands of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.** Yes, they had done this before, this was a part of their national history, and what was the judgment because of it? Military defeat, they were defeated by the Assyrians, they were defeated by the Babylonians, their women were raped, the fathers were



killed, the sons were marched into exile. It was horrible. Had they learned their lesson? The purpose of the horrible discipline was to teach them not to build up a big pile of sin between themselves and God but to keep short accounts with God, to confess their sin and learn loyalty to God. Had the horrible discipline taught them the lesson? Apparently not, because here they are at it again - piling up a great big pile of sin between themselves and God. In that situation, when you're repeating the mistake what should you expect? Much of the same but on a larger scale, larger military defeat, longer period of captivity, and so forth...at least if you're thinking in terms of proportion that's what you'd expect.

**But now, verse 8, for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.** You want to observe that from Ezra's point of view this was a brief moment of grace, it wasn't an open opportunity, it was open but it was going to close soon. The Lord had given them a moment of grace from the bondage. Bondage to what? What is it that always puts us in bondage? Sin. Were they receiving the consequences of sin? They had been in Babylon for 70 years before Cyrus granted the right to return. It was God's grace to allow them a window of opportunity through Cyrus to return and rebuild the Temple. The Hebrew for **grace** means "to feel sympathy, compassion, pity." God felt sympathy for them when He looked down on them in Babylon and out of that sympathy he left **an escaped remnant and** gave them **a peg in His holy place**. Two things there reveal God's sympathy toward them. And you want to observe that God is not a cold statue in heaven unconcerned about His people. He is concerned and He feels sympathy. Out of that he did two things. First, he allowed the return of a **remnant** to Jerusalem from captivity through the decrees of Persian monarchs like Cyrus and Artaxerxes. God worked through those Gentile kings on their behalf even though He was under no obligation to allow them to return. They deserved everything they got and much more. Therefore it was out of His sympathy for them that He allowed them to return. Second, he allowed the rebuilding of the Temple, **His holy place**. God had worked through Cyrus and Darius to permit them to rebuild the Temple which was necessary to the proper worship of God.

The effect of God's sympathy toward their plight in verse 8 is **that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.** What they were facing was difficult and because of God's sympathy He had enlightened their eyes and granted them a little reviving from **the bondage.** Take a look at the **enlightening of our eyes.** You know that glimmer of joy that you can see in someone's eyes or the lack thereof? That's what this is talking about. When a person is in bondage you don't see that glimmer of joy. So what the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple had done was given them a little joy. The second thing God did was **grant them a little reviving.** You know people that are so down they're practically dead while still living? That was the way it was for them, they were like dead people living. So what the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple did was give them a reviving of life. It reminded them that there were still things worth living for. Jerusalem and the Temple are the center of joy and life to every Jew. It's why when they were in Babylon the words of Psalm 137:5-6 were penned, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy." When I went to Jerusalem I ate at an Armenian restaurant and there was this beautiful piece of artwork of Jerusalem and around it in Hebrew and English you have that famous passage from Ps 137 written. It's done on lambskin and I wanted to buy it but it was \$6000. It was a marvelous thing and it is an important thing to every Jew. Jerusalem and the Temple are the center of all life and joy. It's why Jews in the Diaspora, at the end of every Passover Seder, say "Next year in Jerusalem." It's their longing to return to Jerusalem. God had granted that to give them a little life, a little joy in their bondage.

Verse 9, explanation, **For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.** The Hebrew for grace means "to feel sympathy, compassion, pity." They were slaves, they were in captivity but why had God not **forsaken** them? It certainly wasn't because of anything in them. They were disgusting just like you and I are. What was it? God's **lovingkindness.** That Hebrew word is *chesed*, it's the Hebrew word for loyalty within a covenant, love within a relationship. God doesn't have this love with any other nation. He has this love only with the nation Israel. They are His covenant nation.

And if it were not for this covenant God would have forsaken them. But because God is faithful to His covenant He did not forsake them but rather gave them favor **in the sight of the kings of Persia** to permit three things; first, to return to Jerusalem, second, to rebuild the Temple, and here for the first time we see the third thing which will take place shortly in Nehemiah's day, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, **to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.** Three significant grace gifts all based on God's loyalty to His covenant. The three grace gifts are central to the covenant plan of God ultimately to be fulfilled in the millennium. But the significance for Ezra's generation was that they could see God working to establish His covenant purposes. This would give them some joy in life that they did not deserve and which apart from Him would be non-existent.

Verse 10, **Now, our God, what shall we say after this?** And here we get back to the elements of confession in prayer. The first one was verse 6, the proper mental attitude in confession. We should be ashamed and embarrassed over our sin. If we don't have that attitude it's probably not a genuine confession, we're going through some kind of religious motion and that's not what God is interested in. He is interested in a proper mental attitude. The second element is we're not coming to Him with some kind of excuse embedded in the confession. That's what Ezra means in verse 10 where he says, **what shall we say after this?** That is, what excuse do we have? We don't have any excuse. That's a requirement for a true confession. As long as you are trying to justify why you did what you did it's not a true confession. You're still trying to weasel yourself out of it. No, you've got to admit it fully. I have no excuse God, I violated your holiness.

The third element is next, he starts to cite the commandment they have broken. He says, **For we have forsaken Your commandments, 11which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. 12So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.'** In other words, he cited every command we looked at earlier, Deut 7:1-5 and he said

we blew it. Another important element of true confession. You cite the commandment that you have violated. You don't just say, well God, I did a bad thing and move on. That's not really confession, you admit to the crime you committed. So there are three things you can put with the doctrine of confession; first, verse 6, the proper mental attitude of shame and embarrassment over the sin, second, verse 10, the absence of excuses and third, verses 10-11, the citation of the crime committed.

Now observing verses 11-12 we see the loose citation of the section of Scripture they had violated and in it you see the covenantal structure of the OT. There was a land that they were entering, which God had given them as an eternal possession but was filled with peoples who committed abominations and polluted the land with these abominations. Joshua and his generation were sent in to remove those people, to have conquest. Why? So God could dwell with them in the land in the Temple. That's what God wants. He wants to dwell with Israel in that land but to do so the people committing abominations must be removed. That's why God originally said when you come into the land utterly destroy all the people there, it was the rules of holy war, get them out of the land. Why? Because I can't dwell with you until those abominations are removed. I am holy and therefore the land of my dwelling must be holy. That's why people call it the holy land. It's not too holy today or else God would be dwelling there. But it will be holy in the future millennium and it will remain holy forevermore. How is it going to become holy? A greater than Joshua's Conquest. Jesus' Conquest at the Second Coming is going to complete what Joshua failed to complete. He's going to utterly destroy every people that are trying to get their greedy little fingers on that parcel of land because they are corrupting it and He's going to put a new heart in Israel so that they will obey Him perfectly. That's the only way God can dwell with Israel in the land eternally. And that's what the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is all about. Ezra knew that that condition could never come about if they were in violent disobedience to the word of God. So he is upset and he is confessing his sin and the sin of his nation.

Now in verse 13 he points out that God had punished them less than they deserved. **After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this.** He's referring to the fact that they spent a mere 70 years in Babylon. But if God

had punished them proportionate to their **evil deeds** they would have been there a lot longer than that. We don't understand how exceedingly sinful we are and how extremely offensive we are to God. And yet God does not punish us proportionately. He mercifully punishes us much less than we deserve. And so when you are disciplined and it doesn't seem proportionate to the crime don't conclude that you got away with something. You should never do that. You should recognize what Ezra recognizes here, that God has been merciful toward you and you didn't get even half of what you deserved.

Verse 14, after all this disproportionate merciful dealing of God, **shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations?** In other words, here we are doing the same thing we did before. Is this how we should repay God for his mercy? Do the sin again? If we do the same sin again wouldn't we incite His great anger? Ezra asks, **Would you not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?** That is, wouldn't God be totally justified in totally destroying them if they did the same sin again? Of course He would be justified. They had no right to existence. You have no right to existence. If you think you are a good person or I am a good person you are sorely mistaken. There is none good but God! "In a nutshell, Ezra was describing the position of all mankind before God. As people disobey the Word of God they stand under His wrath in their guilt."<sup>1</sup> Are you a sinner? You admit you are a sinner by conception, a sinner by birth, a sinner by act. What do you deserve? DEATH! Sin is a capital crime; you deserve eternal separation from God. Why don't you get that? Because of His mercy. Out of His mercy He chose to save some. People cringe at the doctrine of election. They say, that's not fair. It's not fair for God to pick some and not pick others. They miss the whole point of the Bible. If God didn't pick some nobody would have ever picked Him. We are sinners and we are hiding from God just like Adam in the garden. Election is taught as early as Gen 3. If God did not come looking for Adam, Adam never would have come looking for God. And God would have been perfectly just in saying aw phooey, and dropping the whole thing. But He didn't and that's where His mercy comes into the picture. God is merciful.

And here we see some of God's mercy toward Israel. They deserved more than they got, they deserved total extermination. But what they got is mercy! Aren't you glad God is God? Verse 15, **O LORD God of Israel, You are**

**righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before you because of this.** He cites God's righteousness because he doesn't want to imply that if God was righteous He would destroy us. God is righteous because He would one day solve the sin problem in His son, putting Him to destruction rather than all of us. So God is righteous in leaving **an escaped remnant**. But he's quick to follow up by saying that **we are before You in our guilt**. God's righteous dealings with them are not because of them. They are **guilty**. And left in their own **guilt...no one can stand before** Him. No one. If God is not merciful to them on the basis of His covenant love for them which centers on the Messiah's provision for their guilt then that's it, total annihilation. It's what we all deserve. There but for the mercy of God go I.

In summary, after almost five months in the land the newly appointed judges revealed to Ezra that the Jews in the land had violated the Mosaic Law by pagan intermarriages. These intermarriages had kindled God's wrath and set them on a course of judgment. Ezra was appalled by the sin and sat down to fast and pray along with others who feared the word of God until the evening offering. When the evening offering came he publicly fell upon his knees and lifted his palms to heaven to confess his sin and the sin of his nation. He admits they had a history of sinning and consequently God had rightly judged. And yet a brief window of grace had given them the right to return and rebuild the Temple. Yet they had spurned this grace by willfully sinning again in the same manner. At this point God was fully justified in destroying them completely. If they were to be spared it could only be on the basis of God's covenant love for them expressing Himself in mercy.

What can we learn from this great chapter? Many, many things. First, sin is exceedingly sinful and we ought to be sensitive to it. When Ezra heard of the sin he expressed intense anguish and grief. Too often I fear we are not sensitive enough to sin. We trivialize it and do not strive against it or mourn over it (Heb 12:4; 1 Cor 5:2). We ought to take sin more seriously. Second, confession of sin involves three key elements. First, the proper mental attitude of shame and embarrassment over our sin. Ezra expressed shame and embarrassment over sin. If we don't have the proper mental attitude toward our sin we run the risk of going through mere religious motion and only deceiving ourselves (also cf Ps 51:14-17). Second, the refusal to embed excuses in our confession. Ezra said, what excuse do we have? Excuses make

our confession void of any genuineness. We have no excuses, we sinned and that is that. Admit it. Third, citation of the specific principal or passage we have violated. Ezra loosely cited Deut 7:1-5 as the particular passage they had violated. We should be able to cite loosely the passage we have violated in proper confession. Third, we often deserve more punishment than we deserve for our sin. The fact we do not receive it is due exclusively to God's mercy. Therefore we should not take His mercy for granted or assume that we are getting away with something. There is nothing in us that requires Him to forgive us. Christ is the one who has done everything so that God remains righteous in forgiving us without compromising His own character. We should be ready to admit that left to ourselves we deserve nothing but death and therefore praise Him for His gracious bestowal of mercy.

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<sup>i</sup> Martin, J. A. (1985). *Ezra*. (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Eds.) *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 670). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

[Back To The Top](#)

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