

Ezra's Covenant

Part 1

Text: Ezra 10:1-9

Introduction:

1. Ezra 9 and 10 form the concluding section of the Book and concern the exposing of grievous sin amongst the remnant and Ezra's godly response to it. We can summarize Ezra's godly response to the sin of God's people in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. In our last message we studied Ezra's great prayer of confession before God. Ezra 9 takes its place alongside Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 9 as one of the great confession chapters of the Bible.
3. In this message we are going to study the covenant that was made by the people of God to deal with the sin that had been confessed. Forsaking sin must follow confession of sin. Proverbs 28:13 "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso **confesseth and forsaketh** *them* shall have mercy."
4. Summary of the chapter:¹ "The first part of the chapter (Vs. 1-17) is a record of the steps taken to remedy the sin brought to light in the previous chapter. The strange wives that some of the men had taken were put away. The remainder of the chapter gives the list of the men who had offended in this way (Vs. 18-44)."
5. We will study this covenant that was made under five headings as follows:
 - The Context of the Covenant (Vs. 1)
 - The Counsel regarding the Covenant (Vs. 2-9)
 - The Command of the Covenant (Vs. 9-11)
 - The Commitment to the Covenant (Vs. 12-17)
 - The Convicted in the Covenant (Vs. 18-44)

I. THE CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT (VS. 1)

A. The Example of Ezra's Confession (Vs. 1a)

Ezra's godly example demonstrates the pathway to revival.

1. Ezra prayed over the people's sin – "Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed".
2. Ezra mourned over the people's sin – "weeping". See Ezra 9:3-5. Ezra had the appropriate response to the discovery of sin amongst God's people. Psalm 51:17 "The sacrifices of God **are a broken**

¹ Summary by M.K. Hall

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spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

3. Ezra humbled himself over the people’s sin – “casting himself down before the house of God”.
 - a. 2 Chr. 7:14 “If my people, which are called by my name, shall **humble themselves**, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”
 - b. Isaiah 57:15 “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name *is* Holy; I dwell in the high and holy *place*, with him also *that is* of a **contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.**”

B. The Effect of Ezra’s Confession (Vs. 1b)

“We cannot sufficiently stress how much blessing of God’s people may depend on one or a few faithful individuals. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2 present a revival produced by two prophets who moved two leaders and then the entire people to activity for the Lord. Here, one man’s humiliation to which a few individuals then are associated leads to a general humiliation.” (H. L. Rossier)

1. The size of the response – “a very great congregation”.
 - a. Men assembled.
 - b. Women assembled.
 - c. Children assembled.
2. The soberness of the response – “for the people wept very sore”.
 - a. The people of God began to also be convicted and broken hearted over what had happened.
 - b. God used Ezra to awaken the consciences of the people. We are again reminded of the importance of godly leadership. If those tasked with the high office and responsibility of leading God’s people won’t take sin seriously, how seriously will the people under their leadership take sin? Imagine how different things would have been if Ezra had taken a light and flippant view of the situation?

II. THE COUNSEL REGARDING THE COVENANT (VS. 2-9)

Ezra is lying prostrate before the temple in grief and anguish over the compromise amongst God’s people. God moves the heart of one called Shechaniah to see the situation with clarity and offer his leader some sound advice as to the way forward.

A. The Content of Shechaniah’s Counsel (Vs. 2-4)

His counsel was:

1. Humble – “we have trespassed” (Vs. 2a).

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- a. Like Ezra, Shechaniah humbles himself over the sin of the people. His name does not appear in the list of offenders at the end of the chapter but he was prepared to be a part of the solution. Some of his own relatives were involved in the compromise (Vs. 26). This took real humility, courage and discernment to acknowledge a wrong his own relatives were involved with and then be a part standing with Ezra to help deal with the problem. Shechaniah's are all too rare in churches today! Sadly, the majority tend to blindly defend their relatives rather than looking at things biblically in the situation.
 - b. Wiersbe notes, "Shecaniah was the spokesman for the people, a man whose own relatives had sinned by marrying foreign women. **In my pastoral ministry, I've seen churches split and their witness almost destroyed because people have sided with their disobedient relatives in matters of discipline instead of with the Lord and His Word.**"
 - c. As a church member, when all the debate is over on the more subjective matters (e.g., "how" something was handled), you need to plant your feet on the right side (Scriptural) of the issue and stand there. That means waiting on the Lord, thinking biblically, being discerning, getting wise counsel (e.g., pastor, mature members) and allowing time for the emotional hype and dust to settle so you can see things clearly. Something I have learned is that no matter how gracious and loving you may endeavour to be, certain issues by their very nature are just plain hard and difficult to deal with. There is no easy way of resolving them. The Biblical way of dealing with sin and error is not the path of ease! **Never put family and friends before God and His Word.**
2. Hopeful – "yet now there is hope" (Vs. 2b). Shechaniah was sober about what had happened but he also saw the situation with the eye of faith. He had eyes to see a godly solution to the problem. This is the right balance in responding to sin. There needs to be both:
 - a. Humility for past wrongs.
 - b. Hope for future restoration.
 3. Practical – "let us make a covenant" (Vs. 3a). Shechaniah suggested a specific plan to resolve the situation in a godly manner. He recommended a covenant be made.
 - a. The Person of the Covenant – "a covenant **with our God**".
 - b. The Particulars of the Covenant – "to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them". They would resolve to put away their heathen wives and children. Imagine how hard this would have been to actually carry out in practice!
 - i. We know that God hates "putting away" (Mal. 2:16) but this was necessary at this unique time of history in the national life of Israel. Remember that God is dealing with

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Israel, not the church at this time. The “holy seed” was being mingled with the heathen (Ez. 9:2) which if allowed to continue could threaten the integrity of the Messianic seed line, hence why drastic measures had to be taken. Also, this painful procedure would never have needed to happen if God’s people had just obeyed God in the first place and not taken heathen wives. Sin always brings pain, hurt and damage into people’s lives. The way of obedience brings blessing and peace.

- ii. The New Testament standard is higher for an unbelieving spouse. See 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 1 Peter 3:1-2. If you are saved, you should never be unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14) but if you find yourself in that situation due to your unsaved past or a foolish choice made when you weren’t walking with the Lord, then you are to remain faithful to your marriage and seek to win your unsaved spouse for Christ.
4. Respectful – “according to the counsel of my lord” (Vs. 3b).
 - a. Shechaniah gives plain, honest and biblical advice but he strikes the right balance when offering advice to his spiritual leader. He is not forceful and demanding in a fleshly way. He is respectful and allows for input and guidance from Ezra and from other godly individuals in the assembly (“and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God”). This was not carnal “my way or the highway” advice. **The one giving counsel was open to counsel himself!**
 - b. Shechaniah also uses a respectful title (“lord”) when addressing Ezra which would be equivalent to something like “sir” or “mister” in today’s vernacular.
 - c. Note: This is the right approach when giving advice to someone in a position of authority. God’s people are free to approach their pastor (s) in the local church and offer their counsel on situations as they arise but should temper that with an openness to also hear their pastor’s counsel and the counsel of other godly people in the assembly. Shechaniah gives counsel but is also open to getting counsel on his counsel! He is plain spoken but the tone is respectful and humble.
5. Biblical (Vs. 3c). Shechaniah was also concerned that the action taken be within the boundaries of the Word of God – “let it be done according to the law”. **What a blessing it is to have men like Shechaniah who are concerned that things be done right according to God’s Word.** Instead of thinking along the lines of how the world would approach the situation (e.g., popular opinion, business philosophy, psychology), they think about how the matter should be handled Scripturally. Why would you want to handle a

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spiritual matter with the wisdom of this world which is foolishness with God?

6. Inspirational (Vs. 4) Shechaniah exhorts and encourages Ezra to take godly, biblical action in the situation. Praise God for faithful, godly men who encourage and support their leaders in doing what is right. Shechaniah encourages Ezra to:
 - a. Stand up – “arise”. See the picture? Ezra is on his face before God broken hearted over what has happened. Shechaniah is at his side encouraging him to get up and deal with the situation. There is a time to mourn and pray about a situation but then the time inevitably comes where it must be dealt with. Men of God can be very low at times in the ministry with the great burdens that come with such a high calling. There are times of sorrow and heart break in the ministry, especially when the saints fall. At such times, the ministry of encouragement from men like Shechaniah can make such a difference.
 - b. Take ownership – “this matter belongeth unto thee; we also will be with thee”. Ezra was God’s man for the hour and ultimately, he would have to exercise leadership in dealing with the situation. Again, we note that Shechaniah is working under his leader, not usurping his leader. He recognizes that Ezra is the one who must take the lead but also assures him of his and others support. One of the best ways you can help God’s man is to stand behind him up when he takes a stand on the truth of God’s Word.
 - c. Be courageous – “be of good courage”. The Hebrew word has the idea of “be strong”. Shechaniah helped strengthen Ezra to the task at hand. He was a Jonathan to Ezra. 1 Sam. 23:16 “And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and **strengthened his hand in God.**”
 - d. Take Action – “and do it”. What a contrast to many today who actively try to stop God’s men from taking action against sin! Shechaniah is encouraging Ezra to deal with it!

B. The Commitment to Shechaniah’s Counsel (Vs. 5-9)

Note the adverb ‘then’ at the beginning of verse 5 and 6. These verses details Ezra’s response to Shechaniah’s counsel. Ezra’s commitment to Shechaniah’s godly counsel is demonstrated by:

1. The Swearing to the Covenant (Vs. 5). Ezra leads the people to take an oath of commitment to the covenant as proposed by Shechaniah. Ezra knew that in order to properly deal with the situation it would require the cooperation of God’s people, especially those in leadership (“chief priests, the Levites”).
2. The Seeking of the Lord (Vs. 6).
 - a. Ezra retires to the private chamber of a man named Johanan. This room was probably within the Temple precincts. Now he is away from the public eye but he continues his mourning before

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the Lord over the sin of the people. This provides another secret to Ezra's godly leadership. What he was in public before men, he was in private.

- b. Ezra's fast was an extreme one. Not only did he not eat, he did not drink either. How long he fasted this way we do not know but it again highlights how seriously Ezra took sin. Alone with God, he 'mourned' over the transgression of the remnant. Today all too often we laugh at or view lightly what should make us weep. We have become so desensitized to sin!
 - c. Illustration: Paul had to rebuke the Corinthian church for their careless, prideful attitude towards serious moral leaven in the church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 "It is reported commonly *that there is* fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. **And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned**, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you."
3. The Summoning of the People (Vs. 7-9)
- a. The plan of the proclamation (Vs. 7).
 - i. The leadership of the nation issued a public summons for the people of God to gather at Jerusalem to deal with the problem. The saints must assemble and take action together in unity.
 - ii. This is the biblical model for church discipline. Of necessity, those in spiritual authority must take the lead and propose the biblical and practical way of dealing with the issue but the local church body as a whole must join together in the decision. 1 Co 5:4-5 "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."
 - b. The time period in the proclamation (Vs. 8a). The people were required to assemble at Jerusalem within three days. This gave sufficient time for the people to assemble without procrastinating on dealing with the issue at hand. Now that the issue had been exposed, it would be dealt with without delay. There is a time to wait on the Lord in prayer but there is also a time to act. Leaven needs to be dealt with swiftly or it will spread and do widespread damage.
 - c. The penalty in the proclamation (Vs. 8b). A stiff penalty was attached to the command. For those who failed to obey the summons, they would be required to:

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- i. Forfeit their substance – indicates confiscation of goods.
- ii. Be separated from the congregation.
- iii. This is within the national context of Israel and the powers given to the rulers by the Persian king (See Ez. 7:26) but highlights the seriousness with which they approached resolving the situation.
- d. The performing of the proclamation (Vs. 9)
The people gathered:
 - i. Obediently – “gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days” (Vs. 9a). The people of God submitted to the godly directions of their leaders.
 - ii. Reverently – “trembling because of this matter” (Vs. 9b). The word ‘trembling’ is a strong word and means “to shudder violently”.
 - iii. Sacrificially – “for the great rain” (Vs. 9c). This speaks of bodily discomfort. Dealing with serious sin is not easy and doesn’t feel good!

Conclusion:

1. Do we see sin from God’s perspective?
2. Are we prepared to stand on the right side of the truth, even if it costs us something?
3. Do we give heed to wise, godly counsel?
4. Do we support God’s men when they need to take a stand for righteousness?