

Ezra's Covenant

Part 2

Text: Ezra 10:10-44

Introduction:

1. We can summarize Ezra's godly response to the sin of God's people as recorded in Ezra 9-10 in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. In our last message we commenced our study of the godly covenant that was made by the remnant under Ezra's leadership to deal with the sin of taking heathen wives. 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." We now continue our study of the covenant that was made by the people of God and also conclude our series in the Book of Ezra.
3. We are studying 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".
3. Ezra humbled himself over the people's sin – "casting himself down before the house of God".

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

God used Ezra to awaken the consciences of the people.

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

God moves the heart of one called Shechaniah to offer timely and godly advice to Ezra.

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

His counsel was:

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

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2. Hopeful – “yet now there is hope” (Vs. 2b).
3. Practical – “let us make a covenant” (Vs. 3a).
4. Respectful – “according to the counsel of my lord” (Vs. 3b).
5. Biblical – “let it be done according to the law” (Vs. 3c). Shechaniah was also concerned that the action taken be within the boundaries of the Word of God.
6. Inspirational (encouraging) (Vs. 4) Shechaniah exhorts and encourages Ezra to take godly, biblical action in the situation.

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 and commitment to Shechaniah’s counsel.

Ezra’s commitment to Shechaniah’s godly counsel is demonstrated by:

1. The Swearing to the Covenant (Vs. 5).
2. The Seeking of the Lord (Vs. 6).
3. The Summoning of the People (Vs. 7-9). The people were trembling for both **spiritual** and **physical** reasons.

III. THE COMMAND OF THE COVENANT (VS. 10-11)

A. The Admonition (Vs. 10)

1. Ezra rebukes them directly (Vs. 10a)
 - a. Ezra now issues a direct rebuke to the people for their sin.
Notice the shift from the first-person plural ‘we’ to the second person plural ‘ye’. Ezra had humbled himself in his prayer of confession and included himself as a part of the nation as a whole. But now the time had come to specifically rebuke those who were the actual offenders in this matter.
 - b. There is not the slightest hint of pride in Ezra’s rebuke. This rebuke is issued with the backdrop of Ezra’s deep and sincere humbling of himself before God and the nation in confession, fasting and weeping.
 - c. It is the job of God’s men to reprove sin in plain language.
 - i. 2 Tim. 4:2 “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; **reprove**, **rebuke**, **exhort** with all longsuffering and doctrine.”
 - ii. Titus 2:15 “These things **speak**, and **exhort**, and **rebuke** with all authority. Let no man despise thee.”
2. Ezra rebukes them plainly (Vs. 10b)
 - a. The specifics of their sin – “Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives”. Ezra did not try and generalize their sin or soften his language to make it less offensive. He names the sin plainly and specifically on the basis of the law of Almighty God. Many preachers today are afraid to call sin out specifically. Not so with Ezra. He feared God rather than man.

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- b. The size of their sin – “to increase the trespass of Israel”. Ezra is accurate as to the magnitude of the sin they are dealing with. He does not try to make the sin smaller than what it really is. All sin is serious before God but not all sin is the same to God. By that we mean that there are sins of a greater magnitude in the eyes of God than others.

B. The Instruction (Vs. 11)

Ezra then issues a threefold instruction to those who had transgressed.

1. Confess to the Lord (Vs. 11a). Ezra had prayed his great prayer of confession on behalf of the nation as a whole but each individual would need to confess their own sins before the Lord also.
2. Obey the Lord (Vs. 11b)

True repentance is seen in Ezra’s instruction. Repentance in heart leads to a change of life in action. Godly sorrow over sin and confession was important but the fruit needed to be manifest in godly change. 2 Cor. 7:10 “...godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of.”

 - a. “do his pleasure” = this means to do what is acceptable to the Lord; what is pleasing to Him; that which is in accordance with His will. The first goal and aim of every believer is to be pleasing to the Lord.
 - b. “separate yourselves” = to be obedient and pleasing to the Lord, they would need to exercise separation. Godly separation is God’s will for His people! They were to exercise separation in two areas:
 - i. From the heathen generally – “from the people of the land”. Their failure to maintain clear lines of separation had led to the problem of intermarrying with the heathen.
 - ii. From their heathen wives specifically – “and from the strange wives”. They would need to put away their heathen wives. Refer notes in previous lesson for explanation of the unique context with Israel as a nation at this time.
 - iii. Notice that they are exhorted to first separate from the “people of the land” before “the strange wives”. “Ezra recognized the root cause of the problem. The people were mixing and socialising with the heathen peoples among whom they lived. Had there been no social intercourse with the surrounding peoples the major problem would not have arisen, and the sins of intermarriage would not have been committed.” (M.K. Hall)
 - iv. Dennett writes, “The order of the separation...is most instructive – ‘From the people of the land, and from the strange wives’. As marrying the strange wives had been the sin, it might be thought that these would be

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mentioned first. But what had led to these marriages?
Association with the people of the land. This was the root
of the mischief, and Ezra thus deals first with it.”

IV. THE COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT (VS. 12-17)

These verses record the response of the people to Ezra’s exhortation.

A. The Promise to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 12)

It was:

1. A united promise – “Then **all** the congregation answered” (Vs. 12a).
 - a. The people of God all submitted to the authority of Scripture as communicated through God’s servant Ezra. Remember that when the preacher declares “Thus saith the Lord” it isn’t about your submission to the preacher but your submission to the Lord.
 - b. There is a wonderful spirit of unity and working together in the whole remnant here. There is unity within the leadership of the nation, there is unity amongst the congregation and there is unity and cooperation between the leaders and the people.
2. An unreserved promise – “with a **loud** voice” (Vs. 12b) They were not halfhearted in their commitment. We are given the distinct impression that their response was with enthusiasm and in wholehearted agreement with the course of action demanded by Ezra.
3. An unequivocal promise – “As thou hast said, so must we do”. Their commitment was clear and plain. They would follow through and do as they had been commanded. Again, their submission first and foremost was to God and His Word.

B. The Process to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 13-15)

The congregation now offers some advice to Ezra and the leadership on how to go about resolving the issue in practical terms.

1. Time would be required – “neither is this a work of one day or two” (Vs. 13)
 - a. What the people **were not** suggesting. This was not an attempt on the people’s behalf to delay dealing with the matter. It was not an insincere excuse to avoid the issue. Rather, it was an accurate observation that time would be required to sort the problem out.
 - b. What the people **were** suggesting. They were suggesting that time would be required to work through things because of:
 - i. The size of the congregation – “the people are **many**”.
 - ii. The limitations of the congregation – “it is a time of **much rain**, and **we are not able** to stand without”. It would not be possible to resolve the issue that same day on account of the bad weather. To ask the people of God to

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endure long hours in the freezing rain to attempt to resolve everything that day would be unreasonable. Physical limitations upon God's people have to be considered when working through a discipline issue like this. For example, how long meetings can practically run for before God's people are stretched beyond capacity mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Dealing with sin is taxing for the flock and its under shepherds.

- iii. The scope of the problem – “neither is this a work of one day or two”. There is a clear acknowledgment that the problem would take more than a couple of days to rectify due to its magnitude. There is a time factor involved when dealing with strongholds of sin in an individual or church. Again, the attitude is not to prolong the problem beyond what is necessary but having resolved to deal with deep rooted sin, time will be needed. Confession and forgiveness can take place in moments. The work of removing a stronghold and restoring the life can take weeks, months and even years depending on the seriousness of the problem. Like an older man of God has wisely counseled me on more than one occasion, “This problem didn't develop overnight so it won't be fixed overnight!”
2. Structure would be required (Vs. 14a)
 - a. People would need to come at appointed times and from specific locations.
 - b. Judges representing a particular area would need to accompany the guilty ones to Jerusalem.
 - c. The principle is that the matter would need to be dealt with in a decent and orderly fashion. It would require thoughtful planning. Each case would have to be considered individually to make sure things were done justly.
 - d. Note: The general problem and the principles for dealing with it was clearly defined but even so, each individual case had to be considered on its own merits. This is the nature of issues of a disciplinary nature. Much wisdom is needed to apply the truths of God's Word to the particular cases as they arise.
 3. Perseverance would be required – “until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us” (Vs. 14b). There would need to be a commitment to see the matter through to its conclusion. This would mean resolving it to the satisfaction of God Almighty so that He would no longer be displeased with them in this matter. Notice that God's wrath is described as being 'fierce' which has the sense of a “burning anger”.

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4. Help would be required (Vs. 15)
 - a. It appears that two men were appointed to overseeing and facilitating the process and two men assisted them. Their job was “to see that this affair was conducted in the manner proposed; that the magistrates of every city brought the persons that had been delinquents, in their turns, of which they gave them notice, and took the account of them as they came” (John Gill).
 - b. Note: Since Shabbethai is referred to as a ‘Levite’ it is possible that the scenario was two priests overseeing the matter and two Levites assisting them.
 - c. The point is that in order for such things to be dealt with, it requires those who are willing to give of their time and be voluntarily “employed” in helping the saints get restored back to spiritual health and vitality.

C. The Period to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 16-17)

1. The people followed through on their commitment – “And the children of the captivity did so”.
2. Ezra along with a team of men were assigned to review the cases as they were presented. They commenced proceedings on “the first day of the tenth month” and finished on “the first day of the first month”. That means that it took them about 3 months to deal with this problem.
3. “Thus it took them three months to go through all the cases. According to the list there were 113 guilty men. Leaving aside the Sabbaths there would have been about 77 available days. This means that, on average, each case would have taken about two thirds of a working day. This suggests that there was a fair and compassionate examination of each case with each male assisted by elders and judges from his town or city (Vs. 14).” (M.K. Hall)

V. THE CONVICTED IN THE COVENANT (VS. 18-44)

The offenders are now named and recorded in the canon of Scripture.
How sobering!

A. The Offenders amongst the Leadership (Vs. 18-24)

It is fitting that the leaders be named first. Their bad example no doubt had a devastating influence upon others. To whom much is given much is required!

1. The priests (Vs. 18-22)
 - a. What a sad state of affairs that this sin had infected even the priesthood; those who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders and examples to the remnant. Sadly, even the sons of Jeshua the high priest were involved (Vs. 18).

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- b. What a sad state of affairs it is when New Testament priests¹ dishonor their high calling and bring disrepute upon the name of Christ by engaging in sin and error.
 - c. On a positive note, while these men had set a bad example in taking heathen wives, they set a good example in the steps they took towards restoration for others to follow. Two actions are noted:
 - i. They “gave their hands that they would put away their wives” (Vs. 19a). The expression “gave their hands” is an interesting one. Keil and Delitzsch state the phrase means “bound themselves by shaking hands”. M.K. Hall says it “has the idea that they gave a pledge that they would indeed do so, indicated by a grasping of the hand.” It signifies their solemn commitment to follow through with what was required.
 - ii. They “offered a ram of the flock for their trespass”. In accordance with the law, they offered a trespass offering for their sin (See Lev. 6:6). Praise God for the Provision of the Blood of Christ to cover our trespasses. Christ is our trespass offering!
 - d. Matthew Henry summarizes the situation well, “Those that should have taught others the law broke it themselves and by their example emboldened others to do likewise. But, having lost their innocency in this matter, they did well to recant and give an example of repentance; for they promised *under their hand* to put away their strange wives (some think that they made oath to do so with their *hands lifted up*), and they took the appointed way of obtaining pardon, bringing the ram which was appointed by the law *for a trespass offering* (Lev. 6:6), so owning their guilt and the desert of it, and humbly suing for forgiveness.”
- 2. The Levites (Vs. 23)
 - 3. The Singers (Vs. 24a). There was compromise in the choir! If you are going to stand and sing in the house of God, you need to be living right. **In music ministry, purity is primary, ability is secondary!**² All too often in music ministry, singers and instrumentalists are chosen for their talent, not their integrity. This is especially true in the CCM scene. At NBC we have high standards for those in music ministry for a reason.³ We want to do our best

¹ We believe in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9)

² Obviously there needs to be a basic music sense and skill level to minister in church music but holiness is the primary requirement! The most talented musician might never play in the orchestra if they are living in sin!

³ Remember that outward conformity to standards in dress does not automatically equal holiness of heart.

When serving in music ministry we want to be prepared on the inside and appropriately and modestly dressed on the outside.

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and earnestly endeavour not to grieve the Lord in His Church.

There is nothing more grievous than a carnal choir.

4. The Porters (Vs. 24b). There was ungodliness amongst the ushers!

B. The Offenders amongst the Laymen (Vs. 25-44)

1. The rest of the list concerns the people in general. If the leadership of the nation was compromised, is it any wonder that those under their oversight would follow!
2. "There are several lists of names in Ezra. In chapters 2 and 8 are contained the lists of the captives in Babylon who, with Zerubbabel in 536 BC and Ezra 458 BC respectively, had the desire to return to Jerusalem. These lists are lists of honour. Yet in the final chapter and even final words of the book of Ezra, in stark contrast, there is given a list of the names of men who had sinned by taking wives of the women of the land. In some instances, the names are of the same men or the same families who feature in the earlier chapters. **It is a sad and solemn reminder of the fact that believers who have done exploits for God earlier in life are always at risk of tragically failing Him later on.**" (M.K. Hall)
3. On the one hand this was a humbling thing to have your name listed as one of the transgressors. On the other hand, the record is a record of God's grace in that the issue was dealt with and spoke well of the cooperation of the men involved to submit to leadership and deal with the issues.
4. It is important to recognize that as difficult as this situation was, the Book of Ezra ends in triumph not defeat. If the matter had been left undealt with, it would have been a defeat but the matter was dealt with in a godly and God-honouring manner. So, while it is a sobering note with which to end the Book, it is at the same time, a victory note.
5. But "making it right" didn't automatically heal every wound or remove every pain because the women and children involved had to leave the community and go back to the heathen homes from which they had come. Sin always brings pain and damage to people's lives. "It's easy to pull the nails out of the board, but it's impossible to pull out the holes that they leave behind." (Wiersbe)

Conclusion: Ezra next appears in Nehemiah 8. Thirteen years have gone by. It is now 445 BC. He is the priest (Vs. 2) and the scribe (Vs. 1) and is engaged, with others, including Nehemiah, in bringing the law before the people. By the grace of God, he hasn't changed!