

The Faith-in-Action Preacher

Ezra 10:1-12

SS Lesson for 04/11/2021

Devotional Scripture: Ezek 18:25-32

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Escape rooms are becoming a fun-time phenomenon for a variety of ages. The premise is simple. A group of people pay to be locked in a room and left with a series of clues and hints to utilize in solving a creative puzzle in order to escape. This is all done with a given time limit that is certain to get the blood pumping as the clock ticks down and pressure mounts. Now, imagine that a lone figure in the corner actually has the answers to provide the way out. In fact, the group was told upon entering that someone had the answers they needed. Who in their right mind would hear that kind of information and not use it to ensure the success of the group? Victory is on the line! There are times in relationship with God when people essentially lock themselves up and put their lives on the line. Yet, when solutions are offered for real problems, people have a choice: to listen to their guide or to go it alone. Will the solution be applied or not?

Under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire overtook Jerusalem and exiled the people of Israel in 586 BC. Eventually, the Persian King Cyrus defeated Babylon. He released Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem in 538 BC for the express purpose of rebuilding the temple (see Ezra 10:1). Following that first wave of returning exiles in 538 BC was a second led by Ezra in 458 BC (7:7, 13). He desired to restore the people to a state of faithful adherence to God's law (7:25-27). The third and final wave of exiles returned to Jerusalem in 444 BC, led by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:1-9). Ezra was a teacher of the Law of Moses, commissioned by God (Ezra 7:6). Ezra was made aware that the people of Israel had committed grave sins (chapter 9). The most glaring infraction was that they had intermarried with people groups outside of Israel (Deuteronomy 7:3). This prohibition was not based on any racial or ethnic enmity. Rather, God warned in Deuteronomy 7:4 that foreign faiths "will turn your children away from following me" (compare 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Yet even as they returned from exile for sin, men of Judah were marrying pagan women! If these men were divorcing Jewish wives as well, the result was abuse of divorce laws and resulting hardship for the former wives (compare Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:1-9). Ezra's reaction to the people's disobedience serves as the subject of today's lesson.

Key Verse: Ezra 10:6

Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

10:1-4. Many people acknowledged that something had to be done about the situation. Apparently this sin had gone on and had been tolerated for some time. Children were born to some of those who had intermarried (vv. 3, 44). No doubt some devout Jews were grieved because of this sin in the community. Perhaps they were afraid to speak up or had tried and were rebuffed. In any case, now that some of the leaders were joining Ezra in bemoaning the sin, these righteous people joined in the mourning and began to demand that something be done. **A large crowd of Israelites** gathered with **Ezra** and **wept bitterly**. One man, **Shecaniah**, spoke for all the people who were weeping. He acknowledged the unfaithfulness of the nation but he felt that **there was still hope for Israel**. He suggested that the people **covenant before... God**

to divorce the foreign **women** and **send** them **away** along with the **children** they had borne. This was to be done **according to the Law**. Shecaniah promised Ezra that the people would stand behind him in such a decision. Shecaniah was calling on the nation to do something distasteful and difficult, something that could cause bitter division between family members and friends. However, he appealed on the basis of the Law of God which was supposed to be the people's rule of life. The Law also was a safeguard for this situation, for an Israelite could marry a woman from outside the nation if she had become Jewish in faith. Perhaps that is why each marriage was investigated thoroughly (vv. 16-19)—to see if any women had become Jewish proselytes. Though divorce was not the norm, it may have been preferable in this situation because the mixed marriages, if continued, would lead the nation away from true worship of Yahweh. Eventually they would destroy the nation. On the other hand some Bible students believe this plan was not in accord with God's desires (cf. Mal. 2:16). Do two "wrongs" make one "right"? Perhaps Ezra wrongly followed Shecaniah's advice in requiring these divorces. However, no specific support for this view is indicated in Ezra 10.

10:5-8. The people's sincerity in their confession and repentance was shown by the fact that they **took** an **oath** before **God**. Taking an oath was not a light matter; it bound the oath-taker to do what he had promised. If he did not, he would be punished. **Ezra withdrew** to fast and mourn by himself. **Jehohanan** was the same as Johanan (Neh. 12:23). He was the grandson of Eliashab (Neh. 12:10-11), who was the high priest (Neh. 13:28). Hence, **son of Eliashab** (Ezra 10:6) means "grandson of Eliashab" ("son" in Heb. often means a grandson or even a later descendant). A **proclamation** was sent out to **all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem**. **Anyone who** did not come would lose **his property** and would **be expelled from the assembly of the exiles**. In effect such a person would no longer have any legal rights. Ezra had this authority to send out a proclamation with threat of punishment, because of the edict of the king (cf. 7:26).

10:9-11. The **square** to the east of the temple could accommodate thousands of people. The temple area was always the center of action in the Book of Ezra. On the appointed day (**three days** after the proclamation, in November-December 457) as the people were gathering, a rainstorm was in progress. This was the rainy season (v. 13). However, because of the oath (v. 5) and because of the threat of punishment the meeting went on as scheduled. The people were **distressed** out of fear of God's wrath and over concern about their families being separated. As **Ezra** addressed the group, he cited their sin of unfaithfulness, pronounced their **guilt**, and challenged them to acknowledge their sin and do something about it by becoming **separate** from their **foreign wives**.

10:12-15. The people **responded** that they agreed, but that the matter would take some time because of the large number of people involved and because of the rain. (In fact, it took three months; vv. 16-17.) Someone suggested that each man who had **married a foreign woman** should make an appointment **with the elders and judges** of his hometown so that the matter could be settled locally. This was a good suggestion because the elders and judges of each town would know the individuals involved. They would know whether the women involved were worshipers of the Lord or were still involved in pagan worship. Four leaders **opposed** the plan, though it is not clear why. Perhaps they wanted to take care of the matter right away; or perhaps they did not want to take care of it at all. At least one of them, **Meshullam**, was guilty (v. 29).

10:16-17. In just 11 days the examining began (cf. vv. 9, 16). It took three months for all the marriages to be examined, from **the first day of the 10th month** (December-January 457) to the **first day of the 1st month** of the next year (March-April 456). Obviously the problem was widespread and could not be settled in a day (v. 13). Each case was judged individually so that justice would be done. By this action the community was not saying that divorce was good. It was a matter of following God's Law about the need for religious purity in the nation (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-4). **Ezra** wrote nothing about what happened to these **foreign women** or their children. Presumably they returned to their pagan countries.

10:18-44. Ezra concluded his account by listing the offenders in the **foreign** marriages. Involved in this serious sin were 17 **priests** (vv. 18-22) and 10 **Levites** including a singer and 3 **gatekeepers** (vv. 23-24), and 84 others from around the nation (vv. 25-43). As the leaders had said (9:1), some priests and Levites were guilty. The guilty priests each offered **a ram... as a guilt offering** in accord with Leviticus 5:14-15. The family names in Ezra 10:25-43 correspond closely to those in 2:3-20. **Some of these had children by these** marriages (10:44). This was a grievous separation from God's covenant. Unfortunately the people would again slip into the same kind of sin only one generation later (Neh. 13:23-28). The narrative ends abruptly at this point. The message of the book is complete. In order for the people to be back in fellowship with the Lord it was absolutely necessary for them to have proper temple worship (Ezra 1-6) and to live according to God's Word (chaps. 7-10).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Conviction of Sin (Ezra 10:1-4)

1 Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

3 Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it."

Conviction through confession (1-2)

Confession that leads to forgiveness (1 John 1:9)

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Confession that helps relieve the guilt of sin (Ps 32:5)

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" — and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

Confession that leads to healing (2 Chron 7:14)

14 If my people, who are called by my name, will 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.

Confession and not concealing that leads to mercy (Prov 28:13)

13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Confession that acknowledges God is right in His judgment (Ps 51:3-4)

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

Conviction through a covenant (3)

Covenant because God remembers His covenants regardless of our rebellion (Ps 106:43-45)

43 Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. 44 But he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; 45 for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.

Covenant because God is faithful to His people of the covenant (Ps 111:9)

9 He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever — holy and awesome is his name.

Covenant because God upholds His people (Isa 42:6)

6 "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

Covenant that leads to service to God (Josh 24:14-22)

14 "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." 16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! 17 It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18 And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God." 19 Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." 21 But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the Lord." 22 Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

Covenant by making a vow (Num 30:1-2)

1 Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: "This is what the Lord commands: 2 When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

Conviction through accountability (4)

Accountable to God (Rom 3:19)

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

Accountable at work (Eph 6:5-9)

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. 9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Accountable to higher human officials (Eccl 5:8)

8 If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.

Accountable to leaders (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Accountable for how we treat others (Matt 18:32-34)

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Call for Commitment (Ezra 10:5-8)

5 Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath.

6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

7 And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem,

8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity.

Commitment through promises (5)

Promises must be kept (Eccl 5:4)

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.

Promises must never be slow about fulfilling (Deut 23:21)

21 If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.

Promises must be kept even when it hurts (Ps 15:2-4)

2 He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart 3 and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, 4 who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts,

Promises should not be hastily or rashly given (Prov 20:25)

25 It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.

Commitment through fasting (6)

Fasting because of sins committed (Deut 9:18)

18 Then once again I fell prostrate before the Lord for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the Lord's sight and so provoking him to anger.

Fasting because of seeking to finish God's work (John 4:34)

34 "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

Fasting because of being grieved in spirit (Ps 102:4)

4 My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food.

Fasting the way God desires (Isa 58:5-7)

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Commitment through penalties (7-8)

Punishment for doing evil (John 5:28-29)

28 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

Punishment because of not being obedient to God (2 Thess 1:7-9)

7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

Punishment for being a hypocrite (Matt 23:13)

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Punishment could include distress and gloom (Isa 8:20-22)

20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. 21 Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. 22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Punishment because of rejection of the truth (Rom 2:8)

8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

Call to Action (Ezra 10:9-12)

9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of heavy rain.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel.

11 Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives."

12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do.

Action to gather together (9)

God longs to gather His people (Matt 23:37)

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

God will gather His people one by one (Isa 27:12)

12 In that day the Lord will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one.

God will gather all groups and types of His people into one (Isa 56:8)

8 The Sovereign Lord declares — he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

God sends His angels to gather (Matt 13:40-42)

40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

God will gather to judge (Matt 25:32)

32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Action to repent (10-11)

Repentance is a "changing of one's mind" (Matt 21:28-29)

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

Repentance is a prerequisite to being saved from perishing (Luke 13:3)

3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Repentance is part of forgiveness (Acts 2:38)

38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance is a path to life (Acts 11:18)

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Repentance is having godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10-11)

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

Action to obey (12)

Obedience because it delights God (1 Sam 15:22)

22 But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16)

16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Obedience leads to the praise of God by others (2 Cor 9:13)

13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

Obedience keeps us remaining in God's love (John 15:10)

10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Obedience leads to the reward of blessings (Deut. 28:1-6)

1 If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock — the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. 6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

Obedience brings the reward of freedom (James 1:25)

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Return of Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

Nearly 60 years pass from the end of chapter 6 until the events of chapter 7. It is during this interval that the drama in Persia, depicted in the Book of Esther, takes place. It is also during this time that Artaxerxes issues a decree, forbidding the Jews to continue work on the walls and city of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7-23). Something has caused King Artaxerxes to change his mind, for when we come to Ezra 7 we find Ezra and a group of Jewish exiles preparing to journey to Jerusalem and the land of Judah. This is the second wave of returning exiles, with the third return taking place when Nehemiah made his trek to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1ff.).

Ezra is a very gifted man. He is a priest whose lineage is traced back to Aaron (7:5), and he is a scholar (7:6, 10-11). Whatever changed Artaxerxes' mind about allowing the Jews to rebuild the temple, his decree was generally very supportive of the Jews who wished to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it. It specifically empowered Ezra to lead this effort, to govern, and to teach (see 7:12-26). Any man who is given the right to employ the death penalty is surely a man with authority (see 7:26). Ezra recognized that the king's decree was evidence of the good hand of God:

27 Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who so moved in the heart of the king to so honor the temple of the Lord which is in Jerusalem! 28 He has also conferred his favor on me before the king, his advisors, and all the influential leaders of the king. I gained strength as the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me (Ezra 7:27-28).

Once again in Ezra, we come upon a meticulous listing of those exiles who returned to their homeland, this time with Ezra, some 80 years after the first wave of exiles returned with Zerubbabel. The first wave of exiles numbered around 50,000; this second wave was probably no more than 5,000 strong, counting women and children. Derek Kidner provides us with a good explanation for this second list:

The interest of this forbidding list of names and numbers lies in the fact that in every case but one these groups are joining, at long last, the descendants of the pioneers from their own family stock, who had been in the first part to return from Babylon eighty years before.³³⁷

When the people had assembled in preparation for their "exodus" by the river of Ahava, Ezra proclaimed a fast (8:21-23). Ezra had apparently spoken to the king concerning the sovereignty of his God. Having done so, Ezra could hardly ask the king for an armed escort to protect them and the wealth they were transporting from those who might wish to ambush them on the way (see 8:31). Ezra distributed the gold and silver and the temple utensils among twelve of the leading priests (8:24), and the people set out on their journey to Jerusalem. When these Jews arrived, they offered sacrifices to God at the temple and also delivered the king's edicts to the governors of those lands surrounding Judah (8:35-36).

It was after this that Ezra learned some very distressing news. From the time the temple had been completed until the arrival of Ezra and those who accompanied him (approximately 70 years), the spiritual state of the Jews had seriously declined:

1 Now when these things had been completed, the leaders approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the local residents who practice detestable things similar to those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 Indeed, they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons and have intermingled the holy seed with the local residents. Worse still, the leaders and the Levites have been at the forefront of all of this!" (Ezra 9:1-2)

It is worthy of note that the leaders of the Jews led the way in this sin (9:2). Ezra was stunned when he heard this report. He immediately began to mourn over these sins. He tore his garments and pulled some of the hair from his head (9:3). Those who were godly joined him in his mourning. Ezra's prayer is certainly a model prayer; it is the prayer of a godly leader in response to the sin of his people:

5 At the time of the evening offering I got up from my self-abasement, with my torn tunic and robe, and then dropped to my knees and spread my hands to the Lord my God. 6 I prayed, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed, my God, to lift my face to you. For our iniquities have climbed higher than our head, and our guilt extends to the heavens. 7 From the days of our fathers until this very day our guilt has been great. Because of our iniquities we, along with our kings and priests, have been delivered over by the local kings to sword, captivity, plunder, and embarrassment—right up to the present time. 8 “But now briefly we have received mercy from the Lord our God, in that he has left us a remnant and has given us a secure position in his holy place. Thus our God has enlightened our eyes and has given us a little relief in our time of servitude. 9 Although we are slaves, our God has not abandoned us in our servitude. He has extended kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, in that he has revived us to restore the temple of our God and to raise up its ruins and to give us a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem. 10 “And now what are we able to say after this, our God? For we have forsaken your commandments 11 which you commanded us through your servants the prophets with the words: ‘The land that you are entering to possess is a land defiled by the impurities of the local residents. With their abominations they have filled it from one end to the other with their filthiness. 12 Therefore do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons, and do not take their daughters in marriage for your sons. Do not ever seek their peace or welfare, so that you may be strong and may eat the good of the land and may leave it as an inheritance for your sons forever.’ 13 “Everything that has happened to us has come about because of our wicked actions and our great guilt. Even so, our God, you have exercised restraint toward our iniquities and have given us a remnant such as this. 14 Shall we once again break your commandments and intermarry with these abominable peoples? Would you not be so angered by us as to wipe us out, with no survivor or remnant? 15 O Lord God of Israel, you are righteous, for we are left as a remnant this day. Indeed, we stand before you in our guilt. However, because of this guilt no one can really stand before you” (Ezra 9:5-15).

Time will only allow us to point out a few characteristics of this marvelous prayer.

1. Ezra identifies himself with these Jews, and with their sins. He does not say, “They have sinned,” but rather, “We have sinned.” He does not speak of their iniquity, but of our iniquity (see 9:6-7).
2. Ezra recognizes the intermarriage of the Jews with the people of the land as a clear violation of God’s command, given in the law (see 9:12).
3. Ezra recognizes their sins as part of a consistent pattern of rebellion and disobedience, from the days of their forefathers to the present (9:7).
4. Ezra recognizes their present condition of slavery as the consequence of their sins, and the sins of their forefathers (9:7-13).
5. Ezra acknowledges that God has been gracious in dealing with their sins, for their judgment could have been much more severe (9:13).
6. Ezra acknowledges that in all of this God showed Himself to be righteous, while the Jews have shown themselves to be sinners.
7. Ezra casts himself and his people on his God, Who is gracious and compassionate.

How different Ezra’s leadership style is from Nehemiah’s, as we see it in Nehemiah 13. Ezra pulled out his own hair, while Nehemiah pulled out the hair of the people (Nehemiah 13:25). Ezra did not immediately correct the sins of the people. He was still praying and confessing their sins when Shecaniah encouraged Ezra to act decisively:

1 While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself to the ground before the temple of God, a very large crowd of Israelites—men, women, and children alike—gathered around him. The people wept loudly. 2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, from the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra: “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the local peoples. Nonetheless, there is still hope for Israel in this regard. 3 Therefore let us enact a covenant with our God to send away all these women and their offspring, in keeping with the counsel of my lord and of those who have regard for the commandments of our God. And let it be done according to the law. 4 Get up, for this matter concerns you. We are with you, so be strong and act decisively” (Ezra 10:1-4).

Shecaniah was apparently the spokesman for the large number of Jews who mourned with Ezra. Encouraged by the words of Shecaniah, Ezra took action. He sent word throughout Judah, summoning all the exiles to appear in Jerusalem within three days. Those who failed to do so would forfeit their property and their place among the people of God. As you might suspect, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, as instructed.

What a scene that must have been. It was cold and raining heavily; the people were shivering. They trembled not only because of the cold, but because of their sins (10:9). Ezra rebuked the people for their sins and demanded that they separate themselves from the people of the land by putting away their foreign wives. The people acknowledged that Ezra was right, but they appealed to him to modify the process by which this sin was to be corrected. It was cold and raining, and the matter would take a considerable amount of time to carry out. They asked that their leaders might represent them and that their sins might be dealt with on a local level, in their own cities. This could be done according to a schedule, so that it could be resolved in a reasonable amount of time (10:13-14). Nearly all agreed that this was the right thing to do, and Ezra records the names of those few who were dissenters (10:15) – and so this sin was dealt with. Those guilty were identified. Their names are listed for us to read, beginning with the priests and the Levites who had sinned in this manner (10:18-23). Some of those who had married foreign wives already had children by them (10:44).

Before we leave this tragic incident, let me attempt to be quite clear about my understanding on the teaching of the Bible on the matter of divorce. It is apparent to me that in both Ezra and Nehemiah, divorce was not only permissible, it was commanded. We should remember that Malachi, the prophet who wrote just a few years after this incident, made it quite clear that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). The Jews sinned greatly by marrying foreign wives. They should never have married these foreign wives in the first place. The lists that we find in Ezra should tell us how important it was for these Jews to maintain their genealogical identity. Their inheritance was allocated on the basis of their tribal lineage. The promised Messiah was to come from the line of Judah (Genesis 49:10) and from the seed of David (2 Samuel 7:1-17). They must maintain racial purity. Not only would foreign wives lead them astray (Nehemiah 13:26-27), they would contaminate the seed. Divorce thus became necessary.

You and I are not ancient Jews. Our earthly inheritance is not allocated on the basis of our physical lineage. We are to marry within the faith (1 Corinthians 7:39), but those who married before they came to faith are encouraged to remain married to their unbelieving mate if at all possible (1 Corinthians 7:12-14; 1 Peter 3:1-6). Just because Ezra demanded that those who sinned by marrying foreign wives must divorce them is no excuse for us to walk away from our marriages today. I would liken the putting away of foreign wives in Ezra's day to the teaching of our Lord concerning the severing of a member of our own body:

7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! It is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to the person through whom they come. 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery hell" (Matthew 18:7-9).

The remedy for sin is radical. Let us not misuse chapter 10 of Ezra as an excuse for sin.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/22-return-promised-land-ezra>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

One of the great gifts for Christian instruction in the Old Testament is seeing episode after episode of Israel's rebellion against God and God's subsequent restoration of his covenant people. In today's text, we have been party to yet another instance of this. The people of God were again in danger of sliding back into idolatry because of their disobedience to God's law. This is a reminder that God's laws are put in place for our good and His glory. Like the ancient Jews, we too are tempted by the culture that surrounds us—including the temptation to marry unbelievers (see 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). God's mercy provided hope for Israel to be restored to a right relationship with Him. But that required someone who would take the lead! Not everyone is gifted in the same way in this regard, and different leaders may respond differently to the same problem. (It's rather humorous to contrast Ezra's leadership style in Ezra 9:3 with that of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 13:25.) But it all begins with having a burden of the heart and soul. God's forgiving grace is available to us because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church is his bride (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17). May we be faithful to our bridegroom.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Humble Service - Ezra was a man who boldly represented God and His principles. He desired the Lord's words and ways to be acknowledged, then followed. On one occasion, Ezra humbly threw himself on the ground, bowing before the Lord in the temple. He confessed and sorrowed deeply for the sin of God's people. While Ezra lamented, several visitors in the temple gathered around him, and they too began to weep, fearing God's wrath. While observing Ezra, Shekariah (KJV: Shecheniah), a pious man who may have traveled with Ezra from Babylon, spoke out. He realized the seriousness of the nation's sin—specifically, the Jewish men taking foreign wives. Shekariah suggested the sending away (divorcing) of the non-Jewish wives to preserve the moral and spiritual welfare of God's people. This act demonstrated brokenness over their disobedience and also genuine repentance. Their repentance indicated hope, as the people started weeping over their sin and determined to do something about it.

Decisive Action - Ezra agreed to Shekariah's counsel. Even though this much had been accomplished, Ezra continued his mourning by entering into a strict fast. After Ezra met with the princes and elders, the entire congregation had to gather within three days. The leadership sent messengers to proclaim the urgent meeting. The absent individuals risked suffering heavy penalties. Therefore, the majority of Jewish men gathered at Jerusalem in the pouring rain to show their determination to please the Lord. Ezra ordered the men to break all ties with any of their foreign family and friends. The audience loudly agreed. Ezra pulled no punches. He wanted the Lord's name and commandments to be upheld. Only quick and decisive action by the people would solve their problem.