

This message brings us to the last chapter in the book of Ezra. Ezra is a book about the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. It's about the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of worship in Israel. And it's about rebuilding God's people as people who reflect his holiness and love. This return took place in three stages: First, in chapters 1-6, a group of about 50,000 returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Then, about 60 years later, a group of over 5,000 returned under the leadership of Ezra. And then, finally, about 15 years later, another group would come under the leadership of Nehemiah. By the way, in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book, so the story really doesn't end here.

You can summarize the theme of Ezra in one word: Restoration. There are times in all of our lives when we need to be restored. We all get off track from time to time, and we need to be brought back. It's like the old hymn we sometimes sing: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." We can all relate to that, can't we?

Well, we come to the end of the book, and we see that this was true of these exiles. The end of a book is when we usually expect everything to get resolved and everyone lives happily ever after. But, here, the story ends with a fresh crisis. And it's a reminder that we never arrive, at least not in this life. That's why, both as individuals and as a church, restoration is a continuous thing. You never grow beyond your need to be restored because we're always prone to wander, and sin continues to break out in new forms.

What I want us to see is a very simple but profound truth—restoration requires repentance. You can remember that, right? You can even put that on a magnet and attach it to your refrigerator—restoration requires repentance. And, again, repentance isn't a one-time thing. Repentance is something we come back to over and over again in the Christian life. When Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses, his first thesis said, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." What's he saying? All of life is repentance! I know that sounds bleak—like we'll never make any progress at all. But that's not the point. The point is repentance is the way we make progress in the Christian life. Repentance means we're growing and changing.

We see this in Ezra, chapter 10. Let me give you the context. In chapter 9, there was a problem; a very specific and difficult problem. It was about marriage—ungodly marriages and unlawful marriages. Some of the men among the returned exiles had married foreign women. In the sermon last week on Ezra 9, Kevin Sneed was clear about what the problem was NOT. The problem was NOT interracial marriage. The Bible never condemns interracial marriage. In fact, there are some wonderful

examples of it in the Bible, like Boaz marrying Ruth, who was a Moabite, and Moses marrying a Cushite—an Ethiopian. His sister, Miriam, criticized the marriage, and as a result, she was made a leper. We have many examples of interracial marriages in this church, and that's a good thing that we celebrate!

So, the issue wasn't racial; the issue was spiritual. It goes back to what God said to them in Deuteronomy 7.

**When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations... Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. Deuteronomy 7:1a, 3-4**

That's exactly what's going on in Ezra 9-10. Last week, we saw in chapter 9 that some leaders came to Ezra and said,

**The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices... They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons... Ezra 9:1b-2a.**

And we saw Ezra was quite upset about this. He says, "*When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled*" (9:3). And then he led the nation in a prayer of confession that takes up most of chapter 9. It's a beautiful prayer, an honest prayer. And you might think that's enough. Case closed. Confess your sins, receive forgiveness, and go on with your life. But that isn't restoration. Why? Because restoration requires repentance with confession being just the first step towards repentance. There are two additional things that we see in chapter 10, which are part of genuine repentance.

### **Repentance begins with sorrow over sin**

The first thing is repentance requires genuine sorrow over sin. We see this in verse 1. "*While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.*" It started with Ezra. The power of Ezra's confession wasn't just in the words we see in chapter 9. It was in the deep sorrow that brought forth the prayer, here seen by weeping, and throwing himself down before the Temple. The Hebrew grammar implies Ezra kept on throwing himself onto the ground. He did this publicly, before a large group of men,

women, and children. And it was contagious. It says, *"They too wept bitterly."* The people, even children, were struck by the conviction of sin and the need to repent. They sorrowed over their sin, just as Ezra did.

We see something similar down in verse 6. After they made a plan concerning what they were going to do about this problem, it says,

**Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. v. 6**

This time, instead of publicly weeping and throwing himself down, Ezra withdraws from the crowd. He finds a room where he can be alone, and he begins a complete fast, not just food but water, and he mourns over the unfaithfulness of his people. Everyone is like, "Where's Ezra?" Someone says, "I'm not sure. I think he went to Jehohanan's house. I wonder what he's doing in there." Well, he's fasting, and he's mourning over sin.

It might be worth asking, why all of this weeping, mourning, fasting, and throwing themselves down? What's really driving this? The answer emerges in several places in this text. Three different times they talk about their unfaithfulness to God in this matter. In verse 2, one of the leaders says, *"We have been unfaithful to our God..."* Again, in verse 6, it says Ezra *"continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles."* And finally, in verse 10, Ezra stands before the people and says, *"You have been unfaithful."* It's clear this deep sorrow over sin can be traced back to their conviction that they were bound together with God in a covenant relationship, and they'd been unfaithful to him. They'd broken the covenant.

It was a covenant of love, much like a husband and wife. There were promises made. We call them vows. They'd been neglected, even shattered, and there's sorrow over that. And, yes, part of that is they feared God. In fact, down in verse 14, they speak of *"the fierce anger of God in this matter."* God does get angry, you know. We don't like to hear that, but it's true. They feared God. But it wasn't a fear that cowers before a tyrant, but the fear that arises out of deep reverence. God is holy. He hates sin. He hates it because it's against his nature and because it destroys his beloved children.

I'm afraid we live in a day of such shallowness; a day when we think of God being there just to make us happy or give us good feelings; a day when we read the Bible for comfort, to feel good about ourselves. But this is a story that's entirely counter to that. We struggle to understand it. God's people have gathered together, and they're weeping because they've been unfaithful to him and his fierce anger is upon them.

We who live in covenant with God today, what Jesus called *"the New Covenant in my blood,"* will still feel this sorrow over sin. This a covenant of love, sealed with his precious blood. There'll be times we mourn over our unfaithfulness to our God, this God who loved us so much he sent his Son to die for us. Perhaps this is why Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who*

*mourn..."* You can't manufacture this sorrow. You can only cultivate your love relationship with him. You can only enter deeper into this covenant.

There are two kinds of sorrow—a healthy sorrow and an unhealthy one. A good example of this is found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul had exposed the sin of a person in the Corinthian church. He also came down hard on the Corinthians for failing to do anything about it. This caused not just this man but the whole church a sense of shame and deep sorrow, but they went on and did the right thing.

Later, Paul reflected on this in 2 Corinthians 7, saying to them, *"Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it."* And then he tells them why. He says the reason is *"your sorrow led you to repentance."* Presumably, this man and the entire church repented. But then, Paul distinguishes between two kinds of sorrow. He says, *"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (v. 10).* So we need godly sorrow over sin because it moves us towards change. But worldly sorrow brings death because there's no hope for forgiveness (see 2 Cor. 2:7b); there's only guilt and shame.

I think of a small child. When he acts out in an inappropriate way, you want him to see that. You want him to own it and be sorry about it. Maybe he needs to apologize. All that is good and right, but eventually, you want him to move on. You don't want him to come to you every day telling you how sorry he is and continue to beg for your forgiveness. You want him to feel bad, but not that bad, and not forever!

So there's a balance here, but I believe, today, we too often minimize this. We don't really let sorrow lead us to repentance. Maybe we want to confess our sin, but we want to skip over the sorrow part. But confession without sorrow is like taking a bath without any soap. It might feel good, but there's no real cleansing of the soul.

## **Repentance requires radical action**

The second thing we learn from this is genuine repentance sometimes requires radical action. This action was introduced by one of the leaders.

**Then Shekariah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it." Ezra 10:2-4**

We don't know a lot about this guy named Shekariah, but notice how he names the sin straight up, *"We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women..."* But then I love what he says, *"But, in spite of this, there's still hope for Israel."* Isn't that great? We're in deep, deep trouble. We've really blown it! But there's still hope for us!

Then he offers a radical action—send away all these foreign women and children. He's advising what we might call a mass divorce or annulment.

And this is what they did. In verse 5, Ezra has the priests, Levites, and leaders take an oath to do this. Then they make a proclamation for all the exiles to gather in Jerusalem within three days. If anyone refused, they'd lose their property and be expelled from Israel. So all the people gather in Jerusalem and look at what happened.

**Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honor the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives." (vv. 9-11).**

So they're all standing out there in the pouring rain, soaked, and shivering. It's almost like the rain is adding insult to injury.

And so the people say,

**"You are right! We must do as you say. But there are many people here and it is the rainy season; so we cannot stand outside. Besides, this matter cannot be taken care of in a day or two, because we have sinned greatly in this thing. Let our officials act for the whole assembly. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us." vv. 12b-14**

What are they saying? First of all, they're saying, "Can we please get out of this rain?" By the way, I've been to Jerusalem in the wintertime, and it can get really cold there and rain really hard. So they're freezing to death! But they also say, "You're right. We need to do this." But this wasn't a problem to be solved in a day. So they propose a systematic process in which every case could be evaluated properly and fairly. There's little doubt that part of the process would be determining if the wife in question had embraced the faith and become a follower of the God of Israel. If she had, the marriage wouldn't be annulled. Again, we have many examples of such marriages being blessed among the Israelites.

So they selected leaders and investigated every case. It took three months to finish. In verses 18-44, we actually get a list of the men who were guilty of this sin—110 men in all. Some of them, not all of them, had children. Now remember by this time, almost 60,000 Jews had returned from exile. So this is a small fraction of the people. But, still, those who had fallen into this sin were held accountable. There were even priests and Levites on the list. They weren't let off the hook.

But let's be honest, this whole thing seems to us to not only be crazy but cruel. I mean, you can't help but feel sorry for the wives and children who'd be abandoned. And this seems strange to us because we know God's word as a whole allows for divorce only under certain conditions. Jesus allowed for it only in cases of adultery (Matt. 19:3-9). Paul added

cases of desertion. Paul even said if you have an unbelieving spouse, you should stay in the marriage as long as your spouse wants to stay (1 Cor. 7:12-14). Add to that the fact that God said through the prophet Malachi, "I hate divorce" (Mal 2:16). So what's going on here?

There are a few things that are important to keep in mind; things that make this a very unique situation. First, we shouldn't read back into Old Testament times the same social consequences for these women and children as sending them away would bring today. In that culture, one-parent families were unheard of, and these women and children would have been grafted back into their families of origin. And it was expected in that culture the children would stay with their mothers.

Second, going back to Malachi, God said, "I hate divorce." Well, some scholars believe the reason God said that is many of these Israelite men were actually divorcing their Israelite wives and marrying these women from other nations. That, of course, makes the intermarriage even worse. It is interesting that Shekemiah said, "*Let this be done according to the Law.*" These foreign women were married contrary to the law of God. The marriages were illegal under God's law from the outset.

Third, and this is most important, the action of Ezra is unique because the situation is unique. The returned exiles of Israel are still the vehicle through which God's plan of salvation was being carried forward, a plan that would culminate in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. And here an evil had been done which jeopardized the very existence of God's people. At this point, they have no political power, no army; they didn't even have a wall around Jerusalem. They could so easily be swallowed up by those around them simply by assimilating to their ways and their beliefs. This was a desperate situation, and it called for a desperate remedy.

What does this mean for us today? First, let me just say a word about marriage. This passage is a reminder to us of the sanctity of marriage. Not only does scripture allow for divorce under very few circumstances, it strongly tells us not to marry outside the faith. Lynn and I have been married for 42 years. You go through a lot together in that amount of time, but we're more in love and more committed to each other than ever. Like many of you, we've worked hard on our marriage. It's not always easy. Marriage always brings together two sinners, and so there's bound to be challenges.

It's like when someone asked Ruth Bell Graham if she ever considered divorce in her marriage with Billy. She answered, "Divorce, no. Murder, yes." Sometimes you feel like that, but you work it out. I can tell you if we didn't both share a mutual faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, I don't know where our marriage would be at today. Marriage is hard enough to begin with, and if you don't have in common the most important thing in your life, if you don't share that commitment to put Him first in everything, it's going to be extremely rough. There are so many ways that a common faith enriches a marriage.

I know some of you are already in a marriage where your spouse doesn't share your faith. And that's hard, but as we saw earlier, you should stay in that marriage. Love your spouse. Pray for him or her. Rather than

preaching at them, show them through your faith, hope, and love the difference Christ can make in their life.

Quite honestly, I've seen so many sincere believers compromise in this area of becoming unequally yoked. I've seen parents fall so in love with their daughter's boyfriend; they're willing to compromise and give their blessing to an unequally yoked marriage. Personally, I've been pressured to officiate weddings in which the bride or groom made a profession of faith just in time for the engagement, but the sincerity of that profession is, at the very least, suspect.

But I believe this text is speaking about more than marriage. It's telling us sometimes repentance requires radical action. It's right to confess your sin, it's great to feel sorrowful, but true repentance will also mean there's a willingness to do hard things, especially when it comes to the pursuit of holiness. Because God does call us to be holy, right? God does say, *"Come out from them and be separate"* (2 Cor, 6:17). We read that, and we think of some goofball wearing a placard walking down Main Street, and we sure don't want to be like that. But I'm afraid we've allowed ourselves to think that for Christianity to be attractive, we have to become like the world. We're so afraid of being labeled as weird that we've become like the world, and can't even be distinguished from the world. Ezra is saying if the kingdom of God is going to survive and flourish, it must be different from the world.

And that may mean we do things that are hard and even seem to some a bit extreme. We may even do things not everyone fellow believer feels they have to do, but you feel it's what God wants you to do. Maybe as a single person, you decide you're not even going to date an unbeliever because of where will that lead. Maybe you find it difficult to control your drinking, so you just decide you are not going to drink at all. Maybe you decide you're going to give an unusually large chunk of money to God's work in another country. Maybe you decide you're going to pray and fast for one day a week. Maybe you decide you are going to speak up about something that might get you in trouble, but you know it's the truth, and you know God wants you to say it.

It's like this: When Michigan played Wisconsin in basketball early in the season in 1989, Michigan's Rumeal Robinson stepped to the foul line for two shots late in the fourth quarter. His team trailed by one point, so it was up to Rumeal to regain the lead for Michigan. He missed both shots, allowing Wisconsin to upset favored Michigan. Rumeal felt awful about costing his team the game, but his sorrow didn't stop at the emotional level. After each practice for the rest of the season, he shot one hundred extra foul shots. Because of this practice, he was ready when he stepped to the foul line to shoot two shots with three seconds left in overtime in the national championship game. Swish went the first shot,

and swish went the second. Those shots won Michigan the national championship. Rumeal's repentance had been genuine, not just because he felt bad about how he missed those shots against Wisconsin, but because he was willing to work to make sure he'd never make that mistake again.

Sometimes repentance requires radical action. Is that true in your life? You've confessed your sin, you've mourned over it, but now it's time for action; time to make some hard choices. It's like what Jesus said, *"If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out..."* What will you tangibly do to show your repentance?

The book of Ezra ends with kind of a thud. I mean, the chapter ends with these rather chilling words, *"All these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives"* (v. 44). What a way to end a story, right? But I want you to see that there's hope here. There's hope for them, and there's hope for us. Why is that?

If you go all the way back to verse 19, it says of some of those who were guilty, *"They all gave their hands in pledge to put away their wives, and for their guilt they each presented a ram from the flock as a guilt offering."* They put away their wives. That was good and right. That needed to be done. But they still had their guilt to deal with. So it says they availed themselves of the provision God had made for sin in a sacrifice. They offered a ram from as a guilt offering. That's what Leviticus told them to do when you sinned against the Lord. It says, *"In this way the priest will make atonement for them before the Lord, and they will be forgiven for any of the things they did that made them guilty"* (Lev. 6:7).

Why is it we don't offer sacrifices like this anymore? Because the sacrifice Jesus made was made once for all. Why could God forgive these people's sins? Why would he forgive our sins? Sin always has a cost. Somebody has to pay for it. We know this instinctively. Whenever we do something wrong, it comes with a price. Maybe you've paid a part of the cost of the sins committed by others. You've been hurt; you have scars. Sin always has a cost, and someone has to pay it. But the one who paid the ultimate cost for our sins was Jesus. That's why Paul wrote, *"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith"* (Romans 3:25a).

Martin Luther said, "All of life is repentance." That means the work of restoration is never done. Just when you think you're restored, another issue comes up that needs dealing with. But when we know what Jesus did for us on the cross, the more often we'll repent. And the more we see our own brokenness and sin, the more God's grace will drive us to repent, not just to sorrow over it and confess it but to take action.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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