

September 20, 2009/Ezra 9:1-10:19 (ESV¹)

this morning we're going to look at Ezra 9 and 10 ... 60 years have gone by since the dedication of the temple rebuilt by exiles returned from Babylon ... now, there are still Jews living in Babylon, among them Ezra, a priest and a scholar of God's law ... he is commissioned by the current Emperor (Artaxerxes) to go to Jerusalem and teach God's law ... in fact, the decree that Artaxerxes makes includes the following

Ezr 7:23 Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons.

Ezr 7:25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach.

Ezr 7:26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."

the Emperor provides a huge amount of funding for an expedition to Jerusalem and around 1700 men go with Ezra ... they arrive and take care of depositing the valuables that the Emperor sent, present offerings of thanksgiving and check in with the Emperor's officials over the province ... then

Ezr 9:1 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

Ezr 9:2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost."

God had chosen the Jews to be a holy and separate people ... He had told them not to intermarry with pagans and thereby bring pagan practices into His relationship with them ... this separateness was not about anything racial, it was about fidelity to God the I AM being primary ... (converts to true faith were always welcome ... Ruth comes to mind, as one from Moab who joined herself to Israel and stands in the lineage of Christ) ... the issue is not that these people were "foreign" but rather that they were pagan ...

there were, no doubt, humanly speaking "good reasons" for disobeying God's instruction ... frontier situations always seem to involve a shortage of women ... and there is indication in Malachi (who was a contemporary of Ezra) that some may well have divorced Jewish wives in order to marry these pagans, possibly because they were daughters of wealthy neighbors who could help with business connections ...

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Ezr 9:3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.

this is a distinctly non-21st century response ... moderns have a hard time with this passage, because they don't have the real reverence for God's commands that Ezra has ... this, Ezra sees, is awful ... it threatens the very existence of the nation ... this so grieves Ezra that he literally pulls out hair from his head and sits down speechless ... remember that this fellow has the legal authority cause some things to happen here, should he choose to exercise it ... but instead he exerts real MORAL authority ... (that too, we in the 21st century fail to comprehend ... our leaders by in large have none, because of the chaos and rebellion in their lives) ...

Ezr 9:4 Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

there gather around Ezra those with a proper respect and awe for God's law ... Ezra has not threatened to use his powers granted by the Emperor, he's not organized a protest, he's simply and genuinely expressed his horror at the sin of his fellow countrymen ... and he pours his heart out to the One who is truly in authority ...

Ezr 9:5 And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God,

Ezr 9:6 saying: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.

like Daniel, Ezra includes himself in the prayer ... he's not personally guilty of this offense, but he's part of a community that has treated God's law with contempt ... he rightly understands that makes them both guilty and shameful ...

Ezr 9:7 From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today.

Ezra sees himself as part of not only a present community and nation, but standing in an historical line ... and he confesses that his people have historically brought their own tragedy on themselves by holding God's law in contempt ... and now they are repeating history ... his only hope is in the great mercy and grace of God ...

Ezr 9:8 But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.

Ezr 9:9 For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

Ezr 9:10 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments,

indeed, what can any of us say? ... this is the human condition ... God is consistently gracious and merciful ... in return, unregenerate humans ignore His commands ... Ezra, however, schooled by God's law understands how desperate is the situation of a people who treat their Maker with contempt ... he understands that God is not obligated to let such contempt slide, and in fact cannot and remain holy ...

Ezr 9:11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness.

Ezr 9:12 Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'

Ezr 9:13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this,

Ezr 9:14 shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?

Ezr 9:15 O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this."

the situation is grave ... Ezra doesn't even dare plead for more mercy ... he simply confesses what is true about the people and what is true about God ...

Ezr 10:1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.

this is more than a little personal boohoo ... this is real grief over the infidelity of the nation ... most, if not all, of these folks are innocent of the particular sin of marriage to pagans ... but they understand that there is corporate guilt and that the honor of God has been diminished by the actions of their fellow Jews ... it goes without saying that few of us pray for our nation in this way ...

Ezr 10:2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

note again that Ezra himself is not demanding that X, Y, and Z be done ... his example of genuine concern for the honor of God, however, prompts the right reaction from the people themselves ... modern man, fixated as he is on "feelings," would probably figure that hey, he feels sorry, that's all God could want, that it's time to go on down the road ... but these folks understand that real repentance makes a difference in behavior ... Shecaniah proposes that action be taken ...

Ezr 10:3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.

Ezr 10:4 Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it."

Ezr 10:5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.

Ezr 10:6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Ezra continues to leave it to the people to do what they need to do ... he retires to what seems to be a room in the temple and fasts, mourns, and presumably prays ...

Ezr 10:7 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem,

Ezr 10:8 and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles.

Ezr 10:9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.

this is December 8, 457 (or December 19, 458) BC depending upon whose understanding of the Jewish calendar you follow ... in either case, it's winter and the rainy season in Jerusalem ... the Hebrew conveys the idea that this was more than just a light sprinkle, it's a heavy torrential rain ... the people are sitting in a cold miserable downpour ... trembling both because of their guilt and because of the weather ... God sends them physical circumstances fitting for their condition ...

Ezr 10:10 And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel.

Ezr 10:11 Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

21st century man just won't like this one ... "BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BROKEN HOMES CREATED?" we ask ... isn't God being too harsh here? ... in such a response, we make God out to be in the wrong ... but the fault is with the people, not God ... yes, this is now a mess, but it's their doing and not God's ... and no supposedly "soft-hearted" "solution" that will allow the pagan wives to remain and corrupt the worship of God will improve it ... this is serious business and radical intervention is all that will help ... God's honor and the purity of faith in Him comes first ...

none of this is to say that the women and children were to just be abandoned without any physical provision being made for them ... and we've already noted that, for example in the cases of Rahab of Jericho and Ruth the Moabitess there was room in God's people for all who truly love and trust Him ... but the pagan influence had to go ...

Ezr 10:12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said.

Ezr 10:13 But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter.

Ezr 10:14 Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us."

Ezr 10:15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

Ezr 10:16 Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers' houses, according to their fathers' houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter;

they begin to examine the situation 10 days after the meeting in the rain ...

Ezr 10:17 and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

(depending upon whose word you take on the calendars at this period, this is either April 15 or March 27 456 (or 457) BC ... 3 or 4 months after the meeting in the rain ... the cases have been heard and carefully investigated ... what follows is a list of about 110 men who had taken pagan wives ... in characteristic candor, the scripture lets us see that 17 priests and 10 Levites were among the group ... scripture always tells it like it is ... nothing is sugar-coated ...

the chapter and book end with

Ezr 10:44 All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.

this is not the last that is seen of Ezra in scripture ... he is mentioned in Nehemiah ... but the book ends in a fitting way ... his commission was to teach and apply the law of God ... he did that and the law brought conviction of sin, real change on the part of the people, and the preservation of the nation ...