

Series Title / Holy Discontent: Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah

The courage to change what needs to change when God says it's time to change

May 13th // Courageous, Spiritual Leadership // Ezra chapters 9-10

Starting Point: Where the story of Israel left off...

Ezra returns to find the rebuilt temple and city but very little worship is taking place, and what's more the people have fallen back into predictable patterns of idolatry and inter-religious marriage. Ezra has a holy melt-down right there. And his repentance is personal but also vicarious—the people follow him in a great revival of temple worship and learning their Scriptures.

The Main Text: 10:1

The Main Idea: God sometimes calls leaders to be the change that they're calling for. Ezra demonstrates what true repentance looks like for all the people. They follow his lead.

Background:

- **Interfaith marriage in the OT:**

- Moses and the Midianite woman;
- Boaz and Ruth the Moabitess;
- The many Egyptians who went out with Israel in the Exodus. Rahab etc. And here, some of the people mentioned are in fact Semites—the same race as the Jews. Abraham, the father of their faith, was a Semite, but of Chaldean cultural heritage—from Ur. **The issue was never racial it was religious.** Ancient ethnic groups believed their ethnicity was the result of the gods they worshiped. Their race was inherently tied to their religious practices and the issue here is the prospect that this newly returned people, this newly rebuilt temple—would now be syncretized instead of sanctified.

Syncretization is the blending and melding of faith systems that are incompatible with one another. While **Sanctification** is the setting apart of ourselves—consecrating and devoting ourselves to God exclusively. **The purpose of sanctification was not segregation, but to be a light.**

- **Jesus overturned any institutionalized attitudes of racial superiority.** It is true that the rabbis in Jesus' day looked down their noses at the **Samaritans**, the **Syrophonicians** or **Canaanites**, **Arabs** and the **Greco-Romans** and **Europeans**. But Jesus repeatedly upends this attitude by going to Samaria and ministering among them, by sending his disciples there and to the ends of the earth—by pouring the Holy Spirit out on all nations, and Paul says explicitly “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female” in Christ. All of the social barriers to the Gospel—contrived barriers to people of all races social classes or genders—from becoming a disciple of Jesus—they are erased.
- **Practices of abomination.** Let's take a closer look at the grotesque and often dehumanizing pagan idolatry of the people of the land. Here's what life looked like if you were a follower of a Canaanite, Hittite or another cult. It was particularly cruel for women and children. It was devastating socially and every other way—and frankly barbaric and even demonic. **The people with whom Israel's leaders have intermarried with identify with the worst most egregious forms of religion in the ancient world. It doesn't stretch the facts to say that they practiced mysticism and the occult, various forms of sensual and erotic rites; child and virgin sacrifice and not to mention the general values of arrogance, selfishness, rivalry and hatred.** And compromise at a national level begins in the home. And to compromise in the home is to contaminate the purity of Yahwistic religion with demon cults. This is the iceberg under the surface. The real danger of intermarrying with people who identify ethnically with a particular religion. The faith systems of the ancients was incompatible with the worship of Yahweh in his holiness.
- **Recording or prescribing?** Realize that we do not make everything normative that we find in the Bible. We must learn to view everything Christocentrically—meaning, every story and narrative finds its ultimate explanation in the person and teachings of Christ Jesus.

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Principles for Today:

1. We should avoid any and all fatal compromises to our faith.

Ez. 9:1-5 “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 Perizzites, 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, so that the holy race has become intermingled with the local residents. Worse still, the leaders and the officials have been at the forefront of all of this!”

DL Moody once said, “The place for the ship is in the sea, but God help the ship if the sea gets into it.” It's not too long before he's there that the leaders report to him that something far worse than lethargy or spiritual laziness has set in—the people have compromised by intermingling faiths once again.

Everything they have waited for, everything they have risked is now in jeopardy.

Here's what Jesus told his disciples...

John 17:15-19 *“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them safe from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Set them apart in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ Just as you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And I set myself apart on their behalf, so that they too may be truly set apart.”*

Being in the world but not of it. My Youth Pastor told me once when I was struggling with this “Jeff. You need to learn the difference between isolation and insulation. God hasn't called you to isolate yourself but you can insulate your life in the Word so that the world doesn't get into you.”

Satan doesn't come up to us and say, “Hey, how would you like to deny the core doctrines of your faith today? It will cost you a life of abundance, any assurance of salvation you ever had—and oh yeah—in the final judgment you will be separated from God for eternity. Doesn't that sound like a blast?” He never comes that way.

He doesn't come to us saying, “Hey, how would you like a venereal disease, a few abortions, and a life of impossibly crushing guilt and shame. Or how about an adulterous relationship that'll leave you divorced, kids hating the sight of you, and a blown up family. Ah now doesn't that sound like the good life?”

He never comes through the front door like that. The Devil is the master of getting just a little bit of the beliefs and values of the world into our souls—we begin to make small compromises, little concessions—and one parcel at a time he slowly moves in. Abandoning the Gospel and our mission happens through mission drift. Forsaking our values happens through values drift—until Satan chases everything that is good out of our lives.

Illus. Fish! Satan doesn't want all of you at once. He'll take a nail—he'll start with a small area in your mind or heart that he can compromise and eventually he will run off all that is good and holy and pure from your life. We are called to be in the world much—but not to have much of the world in us.

Ezra hears word that the Hebrews are making fatal compromises to their faith.

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2. We should ask the Holy Spirit to expose areas of compromise. There is no conviction of sin without God's "Holy" Spirit presence to bring it to light.

- **Sometimes conviction comes through a preacher, or a friend, or a spouse who speaks into our lives.** This certainly was the case for Peter. In the book of Galatians Paul had to confront him to his face for the sin of hypocrisy. Often God will use the instrumentality of friends, family, people we trust who can speak into our lives.

Ezra has to be told by others that this situation is going on. He doesn't see it. He's busy with the protocols and procedures of this new revival he's about to lead, but his congregation that's a non-starter for revival.

Here's what Paul said relative to the Lord's Table or communion...

- 1 Cor. 11:28-32 "A person should examine himself first, and in this way let him eat the bread and drink of the cup."²⁹ For the one who eats and drinks without careful regard for the body eats and drinks judgment against himself.³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dead.³¹ But if we examined ourselves, we would not be judged.³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned with the world."
- **Illus. The snakes under my bed and in my closet.** When I turned on the light they scurried away, out of sight. We killed them before heading off to school. Turn on the light of God's truth and kill the snakes before they fatally strike you.

The situation of compromise has been exposed and brought to light. Ezra now has to deal with it before it bites them.

Leading us to our third principle here...

3. We should deal drastically with sin once it is exposed. We should avoid the tendency to overcorrect. *But notice Ezra's reaction.*

- **Ezra's reaction to the situation was emotional.** See what he does... Ez 9:3-4 "When I heard this report, I tore my tunic and my robe and ripped out some of the hair from my head and beard. Then I sat down, quite devastated."⁴ Everyone who held the words of the God of Israel in awe gathered around me because of the unfaithful acts of the people of the exile." Um, no question Ezra is moved—so moved that he is visibly devastated. Tearing his clothes, pulling out strands of hair and tufts of his beard. What a startling visible act of repentance this is. He is emotionally devastated.
- **Ezra's reaction wasn't impulsive.** Ez. 9:4 "Devastated I continued there until midnight." I don't know about you, but I am wired to be a fixer—wired for immediate action. I see the hill that needs taking, and before I know it I am charging ahead to take it. **But the prudent leader follows Ezra's example.** The world will keep on spinning and isn't going to end because you take a few hours or a day or two to gather yourself, collect your thoughts and emotions—and deal sensibly with the issue. Most of the mistakes I've made in ministry and life are because I just got a wild hair and I moved too soon and forced a solution that I thought couldn't wait. Ezra does not do that.
- **Ezra responded in prayer first.** Notice that the rest of Ch. 9 is essentially a prayer of national repentance. He recalls what grace and mercy Almighty God has shown the Hebrew people—despite their repeated pattern of failure and disobedience. Ez. 9:5-7 "At the time of the evening offering I got up from my self-abasement, with my tunic and robe torn, 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 to lift my face to you, my God! For our iniquities have climbed higher than our heads, 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.

His kneejerk reaction is to go to God in public prayer—to acknowledge the grace and mercy of God.

- **Ezra's measures are decisive and swift.** Ez. 10:10-12 "⁴We are with you, so be strong and act decisively... Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have behaved in an unfaithful manner by taking foreign wives! This has contributed to the guilt of Israel."¹¹ Now give praise to the Lord God of your

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fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the local residents and from these foreign wives.”¹² All the assembly replied in a loud voice: “We will do just as you have said!”

Once *he takes time to gather his thoughts* and think through a sensible and impassioned response through prayer—*he then moves swiftly to right this wrong* before it goes any further. At stake is the very foundation of their national identity. The Christ—God’s anointed King Jesus is going to come some 400 or so years later—but not if there is no nation for him to come to. Jesus preached powerfully in the temple portico and on its steps—but he wouldn’t have if this glorious temple to Yahweh, Israel’s God, just became another one of thousands of pagan shrines where false gods are worshiped. *Ezra’s efforts may seem drastic, but they are necessary for the posterity and the preservation of the people of God.*

Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out and throw it away. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Better, Jesus declared, to enter eternal life maimed than to allow your body to lead you to everlasting separation from God.”

The answer is to deal drastically with sin.

John Henry Jowett once famously stated, “When we think lightly of the disease, we loiter on the way to the physician.” And I think today we just think too lightly of sin in our culture.

Malachi the prophet tells us in chapter two of his book, that the men had actually divorced Israeli wives and remarried prominent and influential pagan women in order to be in the good graces of pagan lords.

So the swift act to divorce these women and send them back to their pagan territories, and to once again take the Jewish women who had been abandoned—it feels drastic—but it is absolutely necessary.

4. We should not carry the guilt and shame for past sins once repented. Notice that Ezra moves decisively from the shame of it to the greatness and faithfulness of God.

The people confess, they weep and pray—and the seek God. But they don’t wallow in the past. They don’t dwell on past failures. They refuse to be defined by past failure.

Romans 6:1-4 “What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase?² Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?³ Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, *so we too may live a new life.*”

2 Cor. 3:17 “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is freedom.”

Gal. 5:1 “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.”

Notice Ezra does recall their past—he does recount how they have repeatedly failed God. But he’s not wallowing in it. He’s doing just the opposite. The past doesn’t define who they are today. And neither does it for you. Jesus’ blood is able to wash the worst stains—embrace him today.

Here’s how:

- We search our hearts—Allow the Holy Spirit to search us.
- Confession—it is the acknowledgement of what is true about God and what is true about me.
- Repentance—is the about face—changing course and turning to the one true God.
- **Illus. Failing my driving test.** I blew through a four way stop and nearly hit another care. I pulled over and my DMV copilot said, “Do you know why you did that?” I said, “No.” She responded, “You did that because you didn’t anticipate that intersection.” A few months later I retook the test and I stopped at that

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intersection. Intentionality—the antidote to compromise is deciding beforehand how we will face the temptations that are surely coming our way. **Compromise thrives when the decision to obey fails to be made beforehand.**