

Ezra 9-10: The Power of Influence

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Life Bible Ministry

Ezra chapter 9. Ezra is about that time in Israel's history after they were conquered by the Babylonian Empire, taken away for 70 years of exile, returned, allowed to return by the Persian kings to come back and rebuild the temple. The temple has been rebuilt; the city is still in ruins; and Ezra, who is of the priestly line, and who also is a scribe (meaning essentially that he wrote down the Scriptures, but also that he was a teacher) has been given permission by the current Persian king to come back and bolster the temple a little bit with gifts, money and gold, and to get things moving in the way they're supposed to be.

Ezra gets there, and no sooner does he get there, he distributes all of the gifts that the Lord allowed him to bring for the temple; and he comes to find out that there are some pretty serious problems going on with the people who've been living there now for a while.

And that's what we're going to be dealing with in these chapters. Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 9, it says:

“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. ² For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that (this is important) 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.” (ESV)

Ezra gets back into the land. He's there for a fairly short period of time before he learns that the people of Israel had been intermarrying with the Canaanites and also some of the Egyptians. Remember, all of these people pretty much now are living under Persian dominion, but they are intermarrying with these people, and we're going to talk a little bit about why in just a little bit. But just know this: that they were violating the command of God by doing this because God had very specifically said in the law that they were not to intermarry. We'll deal with that in just a little bit.

But I want you to look with me again at verse 2, if you would please, where it says: “*For they have taken some of their daughters* (meaning the daughters of the peoples of the land) *to be wives for themselves.*” And you'll notice that at the end of verse 2, it says that “*...the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.* (in this)” In other words, the leaders, those who should know better. Even some of the priests were going to come to find out have been intermarrying with the people of the land.

Now, remember that the people of the land are pagans. They're pagans. Pagan doesn't mean they don't believe in God, that's heathen. Pagan means they believe in all kinds of gods. They believe in a multiplicity of gods; they have a god for every day of the week, every situation, every issue. These are the people that the Jews are now intermarrying with, and you have to see here that, it says, the leading families were involved.

That's probably difficult for Ezra to hear, but the fact is they're the ones who stood to profit the most. You might say: Well, profit, what's that all about? Didn't they just fall in love and get married? No, probably not. People back in those days— I mean they fell in love, obviously, but getting married was something that they did for specific reasons beyond simply emotional considerations.

When you and I think of this purely from an American standpoint, we think of: Oh, it's all very romantic; I'm going to fall in love and marry someone, and we're just going to be very happy, and all this weird stuff that goes along with it. For people back in those days, marriage was much more utilitarian. It was done to bolster relationships between families, clans, cities, nations. Peace treaties were predicated, sometimes, upon a marriage union.

Another big reason for marrying and intermarrying is commerce. Do you guys remember in the Book of Genesis when Jacob comes with all of his sons into the land? They came to this one particular city, and there was a city state where there was a leader of this city, and his son fell in love with Dinah (remember one of the daughters of Jacob?) and he wanted to marry her desperately. And so, the sons of Jacob flat out lied to him and said: Yeah, sure, we'll do that. You can marry our daughter. We'll take some of your daughters to marry our sons and this and that, but you need to submit to the right of circumcision or we won't do it.

And, of course, they did that because this guy had already actually had relationship with their daughter physically, and they were very angry about it. The men of the city went to— or these two men went to the other men of their

city, and they sold the whole thing to the men of the city based on one thing: Listen, if we do this, we'll trade with them, and there's money to be made. This Jacob guy is extremely wealthy, and if we just submit to the right of circumcision, which is a big deal apparently to them but not to us. But let's just go ahead and do this thing, and then we'll be able to—there'll be money to be made. Commerce—that we'll be able to do. And he sold it to the whole city—yeah, let's do that.

See, that wasn't uncommon. You guys know the rest of the story in Genesis. I don't have to tell it to you. Anyway, the point is marriage often had a very pragmatic, utilitarian purpose behind it; and most often, it was motivated by worldly pursuits such as financial gain. But the danger here is far more than greed. You'll notice also in verse 1, it says:

“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 (look at this) with their abominations.”

In other words, their abominations are their pagan worship practices, and they were abominations to God because the things they did to worship God— we've talked about this; we went through this in 1 and 2 Kings many times; everything from sacrificing their children in the fire, to all kinds of sexual immorality connected with the worship of their pagan gods—is abomination. It says that the people did not separate themselves from these, from the people and their abominations.

Israel was warned about this influence way back through Moses, in the Book of Deuteronomy. Let me put this one up on the screen for you where Moses, speaking through the Lord, says:

Deuteronomy 7:3-4 (NIV 1984)

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 sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, (and here's the reason why) for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

The concern here is that God's wrath will return to the children of God because they have turned away from the Lord and connected with the peoples of the land and been corrupted by them.

Now, in the New Testament, we have a very similar command to this given to us in 2 Corinthians, which goes like this:

2 Corinthians 6:14 (ESV)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. (And Paul gives the reason by saying:) *For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?*

Note the reasons that he gave there, light and darkness have nothing in common. But elsewhere in the Word, the consequences of connecting with unbelievers is lined out, such as in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:33 (ESV)

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

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The idea here is that all kinds of bad things come into our lives when we are connected in an intimate way with unbelievers. Some people struggle with this and they go: Well, who can I talk to then?

I'm not talking about talking to people. When the Bible says don't be unequally yoked, it's talking about a connection that is intimate. We have to rub shoulders with the people of the world. We do it every day. What the Bible warns against is having a union with such individuals whereby there is an exchange of morality that you are obligated to related to that person's life and their beliefs. And if you're caught in a system where you have to follow their moral or immoral lifestyles or whatever, you're going to be in a bad situation, and you're going to be tempted to just go along with it.

You'd be shocked how many Christians get into a situation where they find themselves facing some active immorality that is being forced upon them, and they're like: Well, what am I going to do? If I say anything, I'm going to lose my job or there's a legality now that I'm involved in, and if I try to get out of this thing, I'm going to be subject to fines and things because I've dropped my end

of the contract, my end of the bargain. I'm forced to go through with this now because I signed a contract. Well, a contract is a yoke. That's why the Bible says: *"Do not be unequally yoked."* (2 Corinthians 6:14)

But it doesn't just say unequally yoked with anybody; it says, with unbelievers. And why again? Because their sense of morality is going to be different; their sense of right and wrong is going to be vastly different from yours. Yours is predicated on an understanding of God's Word, and you're obviously attempting to live your life according to the guidelines and the wisdom of that Word. But those people don't have any such obligations or any such convictions, and so, you're placed in a situation where you're like being forced to do things you wouldn't otherwise do because there's this yoke.

You know what a yoke is. It's the things that used to bind two animals together to pull a wagon. A yoke. Don't be unequally yoked. The Word is given to us here in the Scriptures about this sort of thing.

And then we come to Ezra's response. Look at verse 3; this is interesting:

"As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment (a sign of great sorrow) and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled."

Wow. Ezra no doubt recalled that it was the very sins that are going on right now in front of him that got Israel into the trouble, that forced God's hand against them to put them into exile in the first place.

God had obviously proven to the Israelites that He was willing to punish them for these kinds of things. I mean, He showed in no uncertain terms that He was not going to wink at this sort of stuff. They'd already been conquered by the Babylonian Empire. They'd already been taken away. They are now, even now, under the dominion of the Persian Empire, and they're still giving into these areas of sin.

And Ezra is incredulous that the people would endanger themselves like this again. And he's like: What are you guys thinking allowing this sort of immorality to go on in your families and that sort of thing?

But I want you to notice something. After Ezra's response, which I got to tell you, first of all, I've never seen anyone tear their clothes out of sorrow; and I've certainly never seen anybody pull hair from their head or their beard. I get shivers just thinking about that one, but that's a pretty strong response of sorrow. And I can tell you right now, if I saw somebody do that, and I knew it

was genuine, and they weren't just being a drama king or queen (if it was beard, it'd have to be a king)—you understand what I'm saying— it would get my attention. If I knew that this was a genuine, sorrowful response by a respected individual, it would get my attention.

Well, it got the people's attention. I want you to see here in verse 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.”

This is very interesting. Because of Ezra's reaction to what he heard was going on, and the news and the impact that it was having on those in Jerusalem, there were people there who were obviously aware of what was happening, and they, too, were grieved by it. They saw Ezra's strong response to this thing, and, it says, they gathered around him, and—it says, they gathered around where he sat there, appalled.

And what we're seeing here is the positive side of influence. We just saw a scripture here a moment ago where the apostle Paul said that bad company corrupts good morals, or good character. (1 Corinthians 15:33) And that's influence; that's the power of influence. If you allow yourself to be yoked in a way with those whose morals are not your own, who have no obligation or conviction to follow the Word of God, you're going to find that the influence of those people is going to have a very negative impact on your life.

Now, here's the flip side. Here's Ezra's influence. See, this is the positive side of the same coin. Ezra's response to this thing is so strong. He is so appalled at what he sees. He literally rips his clothes; he drops to his knees; he pulls hair out of his head and his beard.

People see this and they are horrified, and they start to gather around him. Because of this public display of dismay and grief, others were emboldened now to come forward—who may not have been bold enough to come forward before on their own. But because Ezra is leading the way, he's influencing them.

But remember who these people are. These are people who tremble at the Word. Okay, they're— these are people, it says right there clearly in verse 4: *“Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel...”* These are people who love the Word and they know that what they're seeing right now with their eyes is a genuine display of sorrow and dismay. And they— because of their own soft

heart before the Lord, they come and they gather around Ezra, and they're like: Oh, this is bad.

You see? But what's important about this is that we are seeing a godly influence that's taking place by one man. I don't know if the rest of these people who trembled at the Word of God were just afraid to come out and say something, or afraid to respond as if to say: What are you guys doing? They obviously knew what was happening. They were people who trembled at the Word of God (meaning they had a respect for the Word), and yet they—we don't know the details, but Ezra's response emboldens them now.

Let's look now, beginning in verse 5. It says:

“And at the evening sacrifice (it says evening, but for the Jews, that actually was three o'clock in the afternoon, or at least that sacrifice began at three o'clock; he says) 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, ⁶ saying (and then he begins this prayer beautiful prayer; he says):

“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. 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.

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. 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.

¹⁰ “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 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. 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.’ 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, 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? 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.”

What a prayer, huh? What a prayer from a man of God who cries out to the Lord with all of his heart in the hearing of the people. Ezra is essentially describing the sinful condition of all mankind: You haven't given us, God, what our sins deserve, right? In fact, You've been gracious to us, and now, are we going to spit in Your eye?

Are we going to spit in Your face now that You've been so gracious to us? You've been so loving. You've been so forgiving. You gave us a remnant. Listen, if we're in slavery, we're in slavery because we deserve slavery; but You haven't consumed us. Even in our slavery, You haven't consumed us. You restored us, at least to the point of this small remnant that survives in the land. And now, what are we doing?

Ezra 10. It says in verse 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.”

More and more we see that the people are drawn to this expression of grief. The influence of Ezra is having such a profound effect upon the people that they are gathering. Word is racing through the countryside, and people are making their way to Jerusalem, and they're talking about how Ezra the scribe, the teacher, is there in Jerusalem, and he's weeping before the Lord, and people are—they go there, and they behold this, and instantly they are filled with remorse, and they, too, begin to weep before God.

Now, you'll notice here something interesting. I'm going to bring out a couple of things. First of all, did you notice Ezra doesn't get up from this thing and say: All right, here's the deal. We're going to sacrifice some animals. Let's get some bulls and sheep and goats and let's get the sacrifices going because, obviously, our God really likes that stuff, and we've really messed up big time. Let's get the fires burning here, boys, what do you say?

He didn't do that. It's interesting. They're living in the Old Testament when sacrifices are required, and yet, he's not calling for those things. The reason is because Ezra knew what David had written so many years earlier. Let me show you this. When David sinned, he said:

Psalm 51:17 (ESV)

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, (that) O God, you will not despise. (That you will not ignore.)

Ezra knew that what was needed most here was not a show of religiosity. It was a broken heart. It was true, genuine sorrow. Repentance that goes along with godly sorrow. You guys know the difference. I hope you know the difference. There's a thing in the Bible that tells us that there's different kinds of sorrow in people when their sin catches up to them. There's godly sorrow and there's worldly sorrow. Do you guys remember that?

Paul tells us that worldly sorrow ends in death because, basically, worldly sorrow is just: I'm sorry I got caught. (2 Corinthians 7:10) I'm sorry that it's over. I'm sorry that it worked out this way because I was really having a good time. And then there's godly sorrow, which leads to repentance and gives life. It is genuine, real, true regret and sorrow that we have sinned, right?

Have you ever heard in the Beatitudes where Jesus said: Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted? (Matthew 5:4) He's talking about mourning over sin. He's talking about realizing our sinful condition and truly mourning over it. Truly being sorrowful. God, I've hurt you.

The other thing I want to bring up here is, you'll notice here in verse 1 of Ezra chapter 10, it says: *"a very great assembly... gathered."* And I don't want to move past this too quickly because whenever you draw a crowd, you got to ask yourself a question: Why is that crowd being drawn? Crowds can be drawn for good reasons, and crowds can be drawn for bad reasons, right? You can have all kinds of bad motivations that will draw a crowd, but in this particular case, there is a genuineness to this crowd that is being gathered in. It's called a very great assembly, and they are weeping. And this is very rare. This is very rare.

Can you imagine this response happening in the United States of America? When, if America was just being confronted with their sin, can you imagine this? Can you imagine, as a nation, the nation literally becoming sorrowful and

weeping and fasting and mourning over their sin? That would be huge, wouldn't it?

We pray for things like that. We pray for an awakening in this land. There have been awakenings throughout the course of history. Some of the great awakenings that have happened throughout the ages are fun to read about. They call them revivals. But to be revived, you have to have been alive in the first place and then awake—I mean revived. But it's really, truly an awakening when it is people who have never been saved who hear about the depth of their sin and then respond. You know what I mean? That's hugely rare as you can well imagine.

Can you imagine it happening here in the United States of America? Imagine that we elected a president. I'm playing with you here—you got to really go way out on a limb to imagine this. But imagine we elected a president who began to speak to the American people about the depravity of our sinful condition. He started talking about all the sexual immorality that is rampant, talking about all the things that have—literally, as a nation, where we've shot ourselves in the foot, and we're in, and we're limping along, not well at all. Imagine he did that, and imagine the people of the United States responded with just broken hearts. People started flooding into churches to weep and repent over their sin and to come to Christ for forgiveness.

Just imagine what that would be like. Wouldn't that be fun to live in a time like that? I mean, some of you have prayed diligently for that sort of a day to take place. We haven't seen it, at least not that sort of a thing.

Now, just last Sunday, we had Harvest America, which was going on live in Texas; and we had the live stream going on here at Calvary Chapel. We saw some people respond to the gospel on Sunday night. I am told that—they're in AT&T Stadium there in Texas where they held the thing—that the entire area, the turf area, was—they didn't allow anybody to go down there until Greg Laurie gave the altar call, and that after he did, you literally couldn't see the turf. There were so many people who responded to that invitation to come and receive Christ there at the stadium. That's glorious, okay? That's wonderful.

But it's different from what we're talking about right here. These people are responding to come and receive Jesus Christ, and Greg was giving them an invitation that was very attractive. Come and get your sins forgiven. Right? Come and be restored. Come and find hope. He talked a lot about hopelessness and hope. There was a real draw as far as—I mean, if I wasn't saved, I'd have gone forward.

But these people here in Israel, they're not being given a big, a real, fancy draw to this thing. All they're being told is: You've sinned. How could you? And they've been watching this man act sorrowfully, and they are drawn in droves into the city, and they begin weeping. They hear this man's prayer that is just a prayer of repentance: God, look what we've done. He's not offering these people anything. He's not telling them: Come on down and let God heal your wounds. I'm not saying that what we say necessarily when we invite people to come to Christ is a bad thing. I'm just saying these people don't have that.

The point I'm making is: This is such a work of God. This is such a stirring of the Holy Spirit. When people respond, when they're simply told, this is sin, and they say, you're right. And they're broken by it, you know that's God because that's not human nature.

I don't know about you, but I have never enjoyed someone pointing the finger at me and telling me I did something wrong. Never enjoyed that once. Before I knew the Lord, I wouldn't let you say that to me. I'd either make excuses for why I felt like I had to do what I was doing, or I would say: Who are you to tell me anything? Get out of my face. I was too hard-hearted to hear that sort of a thing. And I don't think I'm completely out of the ordinary there. I think most of us are jerks when it comes to that stuff. That's what makes this such a work of God, such a move of the Holy Spirit. I just think it's amazing.

There is a man by the name of William Newton Blair, who wrote a book talking about the revivals that took place in Korea. I personally haven't read this book, but I did read a quote from him. He studied this thing, this great awakening that took place in Korea. And here's what he wrote; he says:

We may have our theories of the desirability or understandability of public confession of sin. I have had mine, but I know that when the Spirit of God falls upon guilty souls, there will be confession, and no power on earth can stop it.

We may have our theories of the desirability or understandability of public confession of sin. I have had mine, but I know that when the Spirit of God falls upon guilty souls, there will be confession, and no power on earth can stop it.

Isn't that a good quote? When God falls upon the heart of people, when God truly falls upon their heart, they will confess their sin. They will. There's no two ways about it. I want to show you, very quickly, two biblical examples.

Peter, what a character he was. Simon Peter sees this great catch of fish that takes place in his boat. And it says that,

Luke 5:8 (NIV 1984)

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

When Simon Peter saw this, (he comes in) he (literally falls) ... at Jesus' ... (feet) and (he says) ..., "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

He wasn't even confronted with anything except a miracle. There's this huge miracle that takes place, and Peter just gets right over to Jesus, and he goes: Would you please leave? I do not deserve to have you around. I mean just like that. He's confronted with the presence of Almighty God.

And then there's that other wonderful story that most of us learned when we were children. It says:

Luke 19: 1-6, 8 (NIV 1984)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through (the town). A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector (because of that, he had a lot of moolah) ... (He) was (a) wealthy (man). He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly... Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

That's what you get for an invitation for lunch by the Savior. The God in human flesh who looks at you in the eye and says: Hey dude, we're going to your house for lunch today. Hey, if I've done anything wrong, I'm going to give a bad, I'm sorry. I just confess it all right now, right here. I'm so sorry.

It's just this immediate sort of a—you're just undone because you've been in the presence of God Almighty. It's not like people can just even hold back, and there's just this immediate response of confession. Oh, confession is so good. Guys, confession is a good thing.

David— I'm not going to show you this, but David writes about confession in the Psalms. He talks about it. He talks about—he also talks about withholding confession. He talks about how the hand of God was upon him, convicting him of his sin, but he didn't say anything. And he talks about—he says, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. (Psalm 32:4)

Have you ever had heat stroke? You can hardly even stand up. He says: That's the way it was—that's what it felt like when I refused to confess my sin. And then he talks about how he poured out his heart to God and he was revived before the Lord. Confession is such a wonderful thing.

And by the way, the Bible says that there is one mediator between God and man, and that is, the man, Jesus Christ. If you need to confess your sins, you go right to God. You do not need to go through a human mediator other than Jesus Christ, your Lord. All right.

Verse 2. Look at this. This is interesting.

“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.”

Stop there for a moment. I love Shecaniah, I got to tell you. He's probably a scoundrel just about like anybody else, but the fact of the matter is, I like the guy because of his attitude. He's one of those can-do people, and you need those people in your life. There's too many other people that go: Oh, we can't do that. But don't you love it when you call somebody for support, and you're on the phone, and you tell them your problem, and they go: Gee, I'm sorry, we can't do anything about that. And that's so different from getting somebody on the phone who says: Listen, we're going to take care of this. And you just feel like: Oh, this is great. You want to kiss him. But this attitude is just so cool.

Shecaniah, he sees Ezra, he's pouring out his heart to the Lord, praying: O God. He's mourning and fasting. But Shecaniah comes up to him and says: Ezra, listen. You're right, and I don't want to suggest in any way or minimize the depth of what we have done in our sin, but listen, all hope is not lost. He says: let's do this thing.

Look what he goes on to say in verse 3. You got to love this man.

“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. ⁴ Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.”

Oh, I need Shecaniahs in my life. Don't you? Don't you need those can-do people in your life who just look at you and go: Let's do this thing?

Notice what Shecaniah says to Ezra: This is your task, buddy. Do you see how the people are drawn to you? You simply got down on your knees and showed the repentance that was real, and now, look at this crowd. And yes, it is a time of mourning and sorrow, but it's also a time for action. And Ezra, you're the man. You're the man. Let's do this thing. There's hope. There's hope yet. So, he says: Be strong and do it. Oh, I love that.

Now, we have to deal with what he is suggesting here because you'll notice in verse 3, he says:

“Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children.”

What he's going on to encourage is something that is very difficult. It requires a little discussion on our part because Shecaniah is suggesting that the marriages be dissolved. This is hard because, you see, God hates divorce. We know that also from the Scripture.

In a perfect world, there might be a less messy solution. But we don't live in a perfect world. In this case, they're choosing the lesser of two evils, and you hate to do that. You hate to compromise in a sense where it's the lesser of two evils. But in this situation, there has been a clear violation of the Mosaic Law in the taking of these wives, and to allow these marriages to continue would not only threaten the ethnicity of these Jews.

You guys, do remember that's what happened to the Northern kingdom of Israel? They intermarried with people to the point where they lost their ethnicity. They lost their Jewish uniqueness. They became Samaritans. Not only were they despised, but they became very sickly. Do you know you can't find any Samaritans anymore? There are none left. They're gone. Samaritans are gone. And the Jews here would have been gone probably in a couple of generations if this thing had not been resolved in the way that it was.

And it's not perfect. It's not a great solution, but it's the only one that they can do and maintain who they are as a people, as God's covenant chosen people. It's the only thing. It's the only option.

And Shecaniah suggests it. Everybody knows that this is what has to be done. It's going to be messy, and it's going to be hard, but it has to be done. And sometimes, separating yourself from sin is messy. Right?

What did Jesus say? If your right hand causes you to sin, what did He say? Bundle it up, put a nice-looking glove on it, so you can look at it? No! Just cut it off! He didn't mean to mutilate your body. What He was saying was: Get rid of whatever is causing the sin, even if it's messy. And you'll notice, He said, if your right hand causes you to sin—. (Matthew 5:30)

In the Bible, the right hand is the hand of power. It's the favored hand. My firstborn son would be called biblically the son of my right hand. It means strength, the son of my strength. It could be translated—

And Jesus said: Even if it's your right hand, cut it off and throw it away. Sometimes there is a process of mutilation—not literal, physical mutilation, you understand, but— there's a process of spiritual mutilation that takes place, where amputation is the only answer. I have to separate myself from this situation, from this person, from these circumstances, because if I don't, my walk with God is not going to exist here in very long, you see. And if we don't take that action, then yeah, you hate to even think about it.

Divorce is never a good option—and we are certainly under a different covenant, by the way, than the Jews. We are not maintaining purity in our ethnicity. We are attempting to maintain purity in our spiritual lives, and that affects who we should marry. We're told in the Bible, as we already saw in that passage from 2 Corinthians: Do not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. That certainly applies to marriage, and many other things too, but we are told very clearly in the Word not to marry an unbeliever.

But under the new covenant, if there is such a marriage, you can't get out of it just because you realize: Oh, gee, I shouldn't have married that person; now, I guess we better get divorced.

No, that isn't going to happen. Look what Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 7:

1 Corinthians 7:13-14a (NIV 1984)

And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. (Why?) For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

There is something going on in the spirit realm under the new covenant whereby even a couple that is unequally yoked— which is not a good idea, but if it's there, God is doing a special work. There's a work of sanctification going on in that couple. Paul says very clearly in this passage: If your spouse wants to stay with you, then do not divorce them. There is not an excuse under the New Testament idea of marriage and divorce.

Okay, this is a very unique situation we're looking at under the law and anybody who attempts to bring the law. What we're seeing here in Ezra into the New Covenant is going to have a problem with the apostle Paul.

All right; verse 5:

“Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. 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.”

That impresses me, too. He's already gotten the people basically to step forward and say: We've done wrong. They're weeping. They've now even suggested a course of action, and some of them have even taken an oath. Guess what? Ezra's still fasting. And it says:

“And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 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.

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. 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. 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.

¹² Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said. 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. 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.” ¹⁵ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

We don't know exactly what that means. The Hebrew in that verse is written in such a way as to be a bit ambiguous. We're not sure if they opposed the plan that Ezra suggested, or Ezra saying, put away the wives, or if they oppose the timing of the plan, as if to say: Let's do it right now; let's not wait. We're not really sure. Chances are, though they opposed the plan (because I think Ezra is probably trying to get the point across), it was almost a complete majority of the people.

Verse 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; 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.” It took three full months to go through and figure it all out. Three months.

Verse 18:

“Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women:...” And it names them there.

How would you like to have your name in the Bible for all time and eternity: Somebody Who Messed Up? They're listed that way because they were priests. I mean, not that they didn't go ahead and list here at the end of the chapter all the men, but the priests were named here first and foremost.

I was just reading in Timothy. It says that when an elder sins, he's to be rebuked publicly so that others will take note. That's a scary thought, isn't it? Think twice about before you becoming an elder. But that's the fact of the matter. As an elder, you are an example to the body of Christ, both in righteousness and in unrighteousness; and you stand before the body in a way of saying: Hey, God has called me to this position of leadership within the body of Christ. I and my family are an example. Not a perfect one, but an example. And yet if there is a situation where sin consumes that individual, in the same way, they become an example to the body of Christ of how that sort of thing is dealt with, and that is not pretty either.

But that's what Paul says to Timothy. He says: If any elder sins, let him be rebuked publicly. So, it's—yeah, it's hard stuff when you read through that.

So, it names them there.

Verse 19:

“They pledged themselves to put away their wives (and that's to their credit), and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt.”

Now, what remains here of the chapter is basically just a list of the offenders, which, of course, the names mean very little for you and I, unless you're thinking of a baby name here. But it all ends in verse 44 by saying:

“All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.”

Just look through that list of names for a minute. Just look through all those names. Some of them are very hard to pronounce. If nothing else, this proves that God has a pretty powerful accounting system. Pretty impeccable, wouldn't you say? God knows those who have done whatever they've done. God knows. And here in the Book of Ezra, they're not even afraid to mention these people as the offenders of those who had violated the covenant of God.

Can I just ask you one quick question? Aren't you glad you live under the new covenant? Aren't you glad you live under a covenant where faith in Jesus is all

that is required to have your sins wiped out? And when I say wiped out, no longer remembered.

God spoke through Jeremiah, and He talked about this new covenant that you and I are under right now, this glorious, new covenant that we revel in. Let me show you this promise from Jeremiah; this is beautiful:

Jeremiah 31:34 (ESV)

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Yes, God has an impeccable bookkeeping system, but when it comes to your sin, Corrie ten Boom used to say that God has cast all of our sins into the sea of forgetfulness. Don't go fishing. Don't go fishing. Don't bring it up to His remembrance. And it's not to say that God has forgotten in the sense that He no longer knows that you ever committed any sin. It simply is a way of saying it will never be held against you.

It blows people away when I say that even born-again Christians who've been walking with the Lord for years, I'll tell him—I'll say when you stand before God, is God going to point out any one of your sins that you've ever committed in your lifetime? Is He going to point out anything? And they're like: Well—and you got to stop, and say: Wait a minute, why are you even hesitating to answer that question by saying: No, He won't point out any of my sins because Jesus bore them all on the cross, paid for them, said, *"It is finished,"* paid in full. (John 19:30) And it's done, and there will not be one of your sins that will be brought up.

Listen, the only judgment that you and I will stand before God concerning is a judgment of rewards, whereby He will grant you a reward according to how you have used what He gave you to use in your life. But if you think that one, single sin of yours is going to be brought up, then you don't fully yet understand what Jesus did for you on the cross, and nor do you fully understand the meaning of those words: *"It is finished."* (John 19:30)

Those are 3 of the most powerful words you will ever grasp in your life. They will change your life. They'll change your outlook on life. They'll change your outlook on God. And they'll change your outlook on yourself and on others. And it takes a weight off you that would otherwise crush you into the dust.

Listen, if you're still carrying the weight of some of your sin, then you need to revisit those three words: "*It is finished.*" And again, in the Greek, it literally means, *paid in full*. Those were the words you would hear in the marketplace at the end of a transaction when someone forked over the money for their goods. "*It is finished.*" Done. Go. You've paid. It's finished. Beautiful words. I am so glad I live under the new covenant.