

Praying It In – Ezra 9-10

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Segue*

1. Since we're jumping into a story already in progress, let me set the stage.
 2. Last week we saw how the rebuilding of the temple was halted by the enemies of the Jews.
 3. When a couple prophets called them back to work & the temple was completed with God's favor.
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4. In ch. 7 the story jumps forward 80 years to the time of the priest & scribe Ezra.
 - a. Ezra marks a major turning point in the history of the Jewish people.
 - b. In fact, he's sometimes referred to as the 2nd Moses because of the emphasis he placed on the centrality of the Word of God in the life of Israel.
 - c. He set himself to first discover what God had said, apply it to his life, then to teach it to others.
 - d. While Ezra loved the temple as a place to worship, he understood that if the Word of God wasn't at the center of the lives of God's people, the temple was an empty ritual and would once again be destroyed.
 5. The Persian king Artaxerxes sent Ezra back to Jerusalem to lead a 2nd return of exiles, 80 years after the first return.
 - a. Artaxerxes authorized Ezra to take whatever measures were necessary to make sure the Word of God was implemented in the governing of the region.
 - b. He also piled great wealth into Ezra's keeping & told him to use it in making sure the service of the temple was kept in good supply.
 - c. Ezra then led about 5,000 of his fellow Jews on a 4 month journey to Jerusalem.

B. *Disturbing News*

1. When they arrived, Ezra discovered something so disturbing, his reaction was extreme.
2. Some of the people who loved the Lord & quickly realized how devoted Ezra was to the Law of God, came to him with a report that many of both the religious & civil leaders had taken pagan wives.
3. In our modern time – this doesn't seem a matter of that much concern.
 - a. I mean—people get married & divorced with no more thought than changing clothes.
 - b. Men all over the world are securing wives by mail order.
 - c. Marriages of convenience are common; often being used to allow foreigners to get resident status.
4. Ezra was shaken to the core when he heard of this intermarriage because it was something God had strictly & strongly prohibited!
 - a. And Moses had explained in the Law *why* –
 - b. Marrying pagans was forbidden because of the *danger* it presented.

- c. Israel was to be holy to the Lord but marriages to people who worshipped other gods would seduce them into the worship of idols & the debauched practices that went along with them.
- d. Ezra knew his people's history; this is exactly what had happened.
 - 1) They'd broken kept the command against intermarriage with other nations.
 - 2) And they'd been seduced into idolatry.
 - 3) The result was their defeat & exile by Assyria & Babylon.
- 5. So when Ezra heard it was happening all over again, he was devastated!
 - a. He went to what in that time were known as the extremes in marking grief –
 - b. He tore his garments & pulled out the hair of his head & beard.
 - c. Then he collapsed in utter astonishment.
- 6. Listen – this wasn't done for effect's sake. This wasn't mere drama Ezra affected in order to impress others with how serious he was.
 - a. There wasn't an ounce of pretence in his reaction to the news.
 - b. He was ruined! Emotionally devastated & overwhelmed by the immensity of stupidity demonstrated by those who'd taken foreign wives.
- 7. In light of all this kind of behavior had cost their ancestors, & in light of all the goodness God had recently shown in allowing them to return & rebuild, how could they renew these steps on the road to ruin?
- 8. Ezra's reaction was so strong, so remarkable, all those who saw it who loved God were moved by his example.
 - a. His reaction to their report showed them what their reaction ought to have been.
 - b. So they gathered around him & joined in his mourning over Israel dangerous plight.
- 9. Several hours later, when the time came for the evening sacrifice, Ezra rose and went to the temple where he fell on his knees & lifted his hands to heaven and raised a heart-rending prayer -

II. TEXT

A. 9:5-12

⁵ At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶ And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷ Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, *and* our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day. ⁸ And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg [toe hold] in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we were slaves. Yet our God did not

forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us,

1. Now note this -

to repair the house of our God, // to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

2. By the wall, Ezra means *identity*.

- a. Ancient cities had walls that marked where the city began & ended.
- b. Walls meant authority, identity.
- c. Jerusalem had been a ruin for 50 years, but it's walls were being rebuilt, meaning the city was coming back to life.

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 which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. ¹² Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity,

3. That is – don't enter into alliances or covenants with them.

that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave *it* as an inheritance to your children forever.'

4. Being so well versed in the Torah, Ezra doesn't quote just one passage. Rather, he sums up *all* that's said prohibiting Israel's marrying other people.

5. Ezra is stunned that after all the goodness God has shown His people they would turn from Him so soon and in such an obvious way.

B. Vs. 9-13-15

¹³ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this, ¹⁴ should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed *us*, so that *there would be no remnant or survivor?* ¹⁵ O LORD God of Israel, You *are* righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as *it is* this day. Here we *are* before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!"

1. What's remarkable in Ezra's prayer is how this righteous man, this one so full of love for & devotion to God, so zealous for personal holiness, doesn't condemn the guilty with a long pointed finger.

- a. He doesn't stand at a safe distance, marking off the abominations of the wicked while reminding God of his own faithfulness.
- b. No, Ezra stands with the guilty & confesses sin as though *one with* them.
- c. His prayer is filled with "us" & "we" not "them" and "those."

2. We see this in Daniel's prayer in ch. 9 when this prophet referred to as the beloved of the Lord, confesses the sins of Israel in the first person. He too says, "***We*** have sinned against the God of heaven and deserve His wrath.

3. Nehemiah, who comes to Jerusalem a few years after Ezra, is another incredibly godly man who will confess the sins of his people by standing with them.
4. There is much for us to learn from this as we pray for our nation, our people, which also have turned from God.
 - a. We are a nation divided.
 - b. You can't turn on the radio or TV news without hearing about the differences between Republicans & Democrats, conservatives & liberals, pro-family & pro-homosexual, pro-life & pro-choice, to name a few.
 - c. People line up on different sides of dozens of issues & oh—the arguments get heated.
5. One of the greatest divides *we* feel is the division between believers & unbelievers.
 - a. Because our *worldview* is shaped by God's Word, as Ezra's was –
 - b. It's easy for us to recognize the sin & evil of those who reject God.
 - c. We see how their decisions have resulted in the disasters troubling our time.
 - d. We get frustrated with them & point the finger of blame, thinking, "If THEY would just get their act together."
 - e. We may even pray, "Get 'em God!"
6. Is that God's heart? Is that His will? No – He's not willing that any perish.
 - a. Jesus died so that no one would have to know the wrath of God.
 - b. He provides the way of escape from judgment for all who come to Him.
7. We must get over ourselves, our sense of moral superiority & distance from others & instead stand with them, *pleading with God on "our" behalf*.
8. We can't do that at a distance; Ezra, Daniel, and Nehemiah show us we don't pray for "them" – we pray for "us." We confess "our" sins!
9. As the followers of Jesus, we must be like Him!
 - a. The Lord of glory, rose from his heavenly throne,
 - b. Laid aside His majesty, veiled His deity in the humble form of a Jewish construction worker,
 - c. And walked among sinners for over 30 years.
 - d. Jesus identified with us so completely, He spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness so that He could in His body experience the extremities some of us have endured.
 - e. Though He was the only sinless person who's ever lived, He was baptized, which is an outward act of repentance.
 - f. Jesus had no need to repent – but every other human being does, so Jesus was baptized so we might understand just how intimately God wants to identify with us.
10. Much later, Jesus told the disciples a story of 2 men who went to the temple to worship.
 - a. One was a Pharisee the other a tax-collector.
 - b. The Pharisee bragged to God of all the good he did, contrasting himself to the wicked tax-collector.
 - c. The tax-collector was overwhelmed with guilt for his sin and pleaded with God to forgive.
 - d. Jesus commended the repentant tax-collector, while the Pharisees prayers

were heard by none but himself.

11. As we pray today for our nation, for our families & neighbors – let's follow Ezra's example.
 - a. "God we have sinned. We have turned our backs on You."
 - b. Christian – Listen: Apart from the conviction of the Holy Spirit, sinners aren't going to repent.
 - c. ***So we must repent for them.***
 - 1) We begin by repenting of our sins – asking God to uproot & clear out any & everything unworthy of Him, that displeases Him.
 - 2) Oh believer! Look to the Word and see what God does when His people repent – we find it in the story of the prodigal son. He runs to them to restore His presence, power, & favor.
 - 3) He clothes us in His righteousness & puts His ring of authority on our finger.
 - 4) And when God does that to us as we stand in the midst of the lost, then His Spirit overflows onto them and opens their eyes & softens their hearts & brings them to repentance.
12. This is what we see in Ezra.
 - a. At the report of Israel's moral failure, he fell into profound repentance and soon others joined him.
 - b. Then together, they went to the temple where Ezra led them in prayer & more repentance.
 - c. Look at the result –

C. 10:1-4

¹ Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly. ² And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

1. In other words; "It's not too late. We can still do what's right."
2. Watch what happens -

³ Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴ Arise, for *this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it.*"

3. As hard as this was, it was the right thing to do.
4. Please don't think this means these wives & children were sent into the wilderness to perish.
 - a. That would have been as contrary to God's will as marrying them.
 - b. These women had families they returned to & they went with support from their Jewish husbands.

- c. Also, it wasn't automatic that they *all* divorced. Any woman who'd come came to faith in the God of Israel remained because she no longer worshipped idols.
 - d. It was only those who clung to their old gods who were sent away.
 - 5. Their presence presented a spiritual danger that could not be allowed to continue.
 - 6. So radical action was taken to put things right.
 - 7. And when they did, a new season of God's blessing visited His people.
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III. CONCLUSION

A. *Jeremiah Lamphier*

- 1. The important thing for us to glean this morning is this: It all began with one man's repentance & prayer – Ezra.
- 2. I want to share a similar story that took place in New York just a block from the twin towers that fell in September of 2001
- 3. Our story also begins in Sept, but the year is 1857.
- 3. A church on Fulton Street has moved to a new section of the city but doesn't want to leave the old building empty so they've turned it over to one of their members to host prayer meetings in.
- 4. His name is Jeremiah Lamphier.
 - a. He begins by for several days spending time along, seeking God in how best to use the place.
 - b. He often walks the streets of the city praying over its needs.
 - c. One day while he's making his rounds, he sees a businessman on the sidewalk, clearly distressed.
 - d. Lamphier knew why; in the Fall of 1857 the nation was in the throes of a growing economic crisis.
 - e. So Lamphier struck on an idea; he'd call a noontime prayer meeting for businessmen.
 - f. Since Wall Street wasn't far away he knew the Fulton Street church was well located for such a meeting.
 - g. He printed up tracts and passed them out inviting businessmen to prayer from Noon to 1, on Wednesday, Sept. 23rd.
 - h. From Noon to 12:30, he was the only one there. But at 12:35, a few others arrived. When the hour came round to 1, there were 6 of them.
- 5. The next week there were 20; the week after that 40, then 100.
- 6. In 3 months there were over a hundred noontime prayer meetings with 50,000.
 - a. While there were women present in these prayer meetings,
 - b. Far & away it was mostly men.
 - c. And by that time the banks had failed – most of them closing for 2 months.
- 7. The Revival spread into New England where the evangelist Charles Finney said so many were being converted they could no longer keep accurate statistics.
- 8. It spread into the South where so many slaves were being converted, they no longer had room for services in the churches and had to use the tobacco factories & warehouses.

9. In Newark, NJ with a population of 70,000 -- 2,785 were converted, most of them heads of households.
10. One of the distinguishing marks of this revival was the centrality of prayer – not preaching, but prayer.
 - a. Preaching was present but it wasn't the main thing.
 - b. Wherever the revival went, multiple prayer meetings broken out.
 - c. And every church would be filled with people praying at 6:30 in the morning, Noon, and 6:30 at night – every day of the week.
 - d. In many cities & towns, once the churches filled up, they began meeting in theaters and halls.
 - e. It was common see a sign in a shop window that said, “Closed- Will reopen at the end of the prayer meeting.”
11. In Washington DC with a population of 57,000, prayer meetings were held all over,
 - a. Including the Academy of music Hall where 5,000 gathered for prayer several times a day.
 - b. Prayer was even held in the chambers of Congress.
12. The Baptists were baptizing so many new converts in the Mid-west there wasn't room in their churches so went out to the lakes & rivers and cut a hole in the ice.
13. In one packed prayer meeting at the town hall of Kalamazoo, Michigan, the leader said, “There're too many of us for each to share a prayer request so write them out and give them to me & I will read them and someone will pray for you.”
 - a. The people wrote out their requests and handed them in.
 - b. He read the first one, “A praying woman asks the prayers of this company for the conversion of her husband who's far from God.”
 - 1) Immediately a blacksmith stood and said, “My wife's a praying woman. I know I'm far from God. Will someone help me?”
 - 2) A lawyer stood, “I think it was my wife that wrote that note. I'm far from God.”
 - 3) 6 husbands stood all saying it was their wife. All 6 were converted that day.
14. After telling this story, Dr. J. Edwin Orr observes, “In evangelism, the evangelist seeks the sinner. In these times of revival, the sinners come running to God.
15. In the 18 months that followed the Fulton Street Prayer meeting – 1 million people were converted in this country.
 - a. That's 1 million new believers who were added to church roles.
 - b. it doesn't include those who didn't register, or those who were already on the church roles but were converted.
 - c. As Orr says, they didn't have their names removed then added back on.
 - d. So there were at least 1 million new converts from 1857 to 59.
 - e. Out of a total population of 30 million that's over 3%.
 - f. In today's terms that would be 10 million!
16. And it began where? How? With who? = With one man, Jeremiah Lamphier, a layman who loved God and saw the desperation in a businessman's face.

17. Now – if you listen to that revival series on our website, Dr. Orr tells how there were numerous glimmers of the coming revival that in the months prior to the Fulton Street Revival.
18. God was getting his people ready in many places for what was about to come.

B. God Hasn't Changed

1. Just like Ezra's day – we are in a dangerous place, for just like ancient Israel, our nation has known the favor of God in an amazing way.
2. Surely we have been blessed by His bounty – above all nations.
3. But we've turned our back on Him & married ourselves to godless idols of materialism & greed.
4. As in the Fall of 1857, an economic & political crisis looms over us that threatens to permanently alter the way we live.
5. Salvation is only a prayer away.
6. Let's end with Ezra's word again in 9:8-9

⁸ And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.