

LESSON 6

April 11, 2021

Unit II: Prophets of Restoration

Confession and Correction

Devotional Reading: Ezekiel 18:25-32

Background Scriptures: Ezra 9–10

Print Passage: Ezra 10:1-12

Key Verse—[Ezra] said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. (Ezra 9:6, KJV)

[Ezra] prayed: “I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:6, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Contrast the people’s need for repentance with their joyful response to God’s Word.
- Believe in your heart that God’s truth is eternal.
- Grow in your determination to serve God in your community and beyond.

KEY TERMS

Confessing (verse 1)—**Hebrew: yadah (yaw-daw’)**: to cast down; throwing down; “confessed” (KJV).

Covenant(verse 3)—**Hebrew: berith (ber-eeth’)**: a treaty, agreement, pledge.

Foreign (verse 2)—**Hebrew: nokri (nok-ree’)**: alien; pagan; “strange” (KJV).

INTRODUCTION

Confession is good for the soul. This phrase is a popular idiom advising people to honestly admit their guilt in order to feel some type of relief. The assumption is that one can ease personal guilt and stress by openly owning up to his or her wrongs. Some have assumed that the phrase is lifted from a Bible verse, but it is actually an old Scottish proverb. Its exact wording is, “Open confession is good for the soul.” While the premise or idea behind it is indeed Christian, the statement on confession is not found in the Bible. In one exposition of Psalm 119:26, it was posited that one’s frank acknowledgment of the evil that he or she has committed is a source of ease to the life of the guilty. Open confession proves that the wrongdoer recognizes his or her condition and communicates humility rather than pride. For the believer, open confession of sin substantiates the genuineness of a relationship with God, admits that the sin is against Him, and opens the door to forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with Him. There are specific verses of Scripture that support the intent of open confession (to include 1 John 1:9; Matthew 10:32; Psalm 32:5). The psalmist’s open confession in Psalm 51:1-5 is a classic example that believers would do well to imitate. Open confession without repentant follow-up is fruitless. When sin is openly confessed, the sinner must commit to turn from it with the help of the Holy Spirit. When Ezra discovered that some of the men among the returning exiles had violated God’s commandment prohibiting marriage to non-Jewish women, he confronted the issue directly. Ezra offered a passionate prayer

of confession on behalf of the entire community. The result was open confession and turning away from the forbidden marriages that dishonored God's Word.

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Authorship of the book of Ezra is attributed to the astute scribe and priest Ezra, whose name does not appear in the account until chapter 7. The book continues the narrative of Israel's history that is covered in the book of 2 Chronicles. Ezra recounts God's fulfillment of the covenant promise to return His people to the Promised Land after the seventy-year exile. The book relates two phases of the exiles' return: the first, led by Zerubbabel, and a second led by Ezra himself. Zerubbabel's mission was to rebuild the Temple, while Ezra's was to rebuild the community, specifically the community's spiritual condition. The first six chapters of Ezra explain Cyrus's edict to end the Babylonian captivity, the return of the first wave of Jewish exiles, and the endeavors to rebuild the Temple. The remaining chapters (7–10) are devoted to the spiritual reforms put in place under Ezra's leadership.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Acknowledging Disobedience

(Ezra 10:1-4)

KJV

NOW WHEN Ezra had prayed, and when he had *confessed*, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken *strange* wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

3 Now therefore let us make a *covenant* with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

NIV

WHILE EZRA was praying and *confessing*, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.

2 Then Shekaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying *foreign* women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

3 "Now let us make a *covenant* before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law.

4 "Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it."

Ezra's focus for the remnant of his people who had returned to their homeland was their spiritual condition. He worked diligently to teach and challenge them to apply God's Word. He emphasized

the practical application of God's Word in daily life. After being informed of the people's sin of intermarriage with the pagan nations around them, Ezra publicly called for immediate repentance. God's prohibition against marrying non-Jews had nothing to do with racial prejudice but was intended as a safeguard against the people being drawn into the idolatrous practices of other cultures. God's law against intermarriage wasn't new—it had been established centuries earlier, before the nation took possession of the Promised Land (see Numbers 25). After the Exile, Jews who returned to the land had apparently tolerated and ignored the practice for some time. Ezra's fervent prayer and confession of this sin to God in the presence of the people convicted them to join him in seeking God's forgiveness (verse 1). Once the leaders took a stand against the open violation of God's law, many of the people began to demand that something be done. Shechaniah spoke for the people and acknowledged the unfaithfulness of the nation but insisted that there was still hope for them (verse 2). Shechaniah suggested that the men would agree before God to divorce their foreign wives and send them and their children away according to the Law (verse 3). By the Law, a Jew could marry outside the nation if the woman became a Jew. We can only imagine the great emotional distress and conflict triggered by the separation of spouses and children. Unraveling the effects of sin is often a painful, difficult process. Despite the difficulties, Shechaniah assured Ezra that he would have the support of the people (verse 4). The community's leaders were committed to preserving the spiritual well-being of the community, even when it was difficult or uncomfortable. Ezra becomes a model for future generations of spiritual leaders of the importance of leading a faith community to spiritual maturity by holding people accountable to obeying God's Word. The response of the people and their leaders was the evidence of their genuine repentance. Repentance is more than an emotion—it begins, but never ends with feelings of regret and remorse. True repentance stems from a change in mind and attitude that always leads to changed behavior.

What Do You Think?

Do you agree or disagree that the church has become more tolerant, or silent, concerning the practice of sin among its members? Explain why today's church may be hesitant to openly correct or address sin.

An Oath and a Proclamation

(Ezra 10:5-8)

KJV

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

NIV

5 So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath.

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

7 A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem.

8 Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

Ezra's response was to demand that the leaders among the priests, the Levites, and the people swear an oath to affirm the sincerity of their confession and repentance (verse 5). This oath was a serious matter because it was a promise to God. It bound the people to do what they had promised; those who failed to keep the oath would be punished. Believers today should remember that confessing Christ is synonymous to taking an oath to keep God's commandments. Even under grace, there are still consequences for disobedience. Ezra's prayer showed that he did not separate himself from the people's sin but identified himself with their sin and guilt (verse 6). Spiritual leaders should address issues of sin with humility and compassion, knowing that at some point, every person (themselves included) has missed the mark of God's holy standards. The required oath was followed by a proclamation to all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem to address this situation (verse 7). Those who refused to assemble would forfeit their property rights and be ostracized from Israel (verse 8). The actions initiated by Ezra and the other spiritual leaders set a godly standard for leaders confronted with difficult situations in their congregations and communities. The exact teaching of the Law was used as the basis for addressing the sin rather than personal opinions. The Bible is the standard that leaders must rely on when sin arises among God's people. The community's spiritual leaders accepted the responsibility of confronting the sin, while also identifying themselves in unity with the guilty. Their contrite spirit and commitment to the sacredness of God's law enabled them to take necessary action to remove the sinful practice from the community. Those whom God has called and given authority to rule or lead must remember that the people ultimately belong to God (see Hebrews 13:7). At the same time, members of faith communities and churches must remember to stand in unity whenever they are convicted and confronted by God's Word.

What Do You Think?

Why does it seem difficult for some to accept the God-given authority of spiritual leaders?

A Restored Covenant Relationship

(Ezra 10:9-12)

KJV

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11 Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

NIV

9 Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt.

11 “Now honor the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.”

12 The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: “You are right! We must do as you say.”

The people responded to the proclamation and its demands and assembled in the square east of the Temple. The area was large enough to accommodate thousands of people. The atmosphere was gloomy—physically and spiritually. The meeting occurred during the time of the harvest rains and cold weather. The people trembled because of the chilly, rainy weather and because they feared God’s wrath and separation from their families (verse 9). Ezra immediately identified their sin of unfaithfulness to God and pronounced their guilt and the corrective solution (verses 10-11). His boldness in this difficult situation is a challenge to the community of faith’s spiritual leadership. Ezra demonstrated that godly leaders do not shirk spiritual responsibility, even when it is uncomfortable or controversial. Despite the challenge of the task, Ezra stood boldly to obey the Word of God. God’s ministry assignments will often require making hard and unpopular decisions that cannot be avoided. Ezra was prepared for this kind of leadership because he had dedicated himself to the study of the Word—to obey it and teach it to others. Spiritual leaders who follow his example can faithfully act in these kinds of situations to uphold God’s honor. The people agreed and promised to do what Ezra had commanded (verse 12). The narrative presents two essential elements of genuine repentance: (1) agreeing with God, and (2) taking action to separate from sin. Confession must lead to correction, otherwise repentance will not occur. Conversely, lasting and meaningful spiritual correction is impossible without confession of sin. To continue in a right relationship with God, believers must personally acknowledge and abandon the practices of a sinful lifestyle. Spiritual leaders and their followers must be governed and guided by the standards of God’s Word.

What Do You Think?

Why is it necessary for the church to teach its people how to deal with sin biblically? What examples can you give of an inappropriate response to sin in the church?

A CLOSING THOUGHT

Sooner or later, every church will face the need to reprimand an erring church member. This situation will arise if spiritual leaders and congregations are teaching and practicing the Word of God. The challenge is having the boldness to uncompromisingly address it with restoration as the

desired outcome. The task becomes less stressful when leaders emulate Ezra's example of demonstrating and practicing how to apply God's Word in daily living.

YOUR LIFE

As a follower of Christ, you can commit yourself to God's Word as Ezra did. By applying the Word to your life first and demonstrating compassionate concern for believers who have fallen into sin, you can help lead others to repentance and spiritual restoration.

YOUR WORLD!

To ensure the church's ongoing commitment to the teachings of Scripture, we must actively teach the importance of reverencing God's Word and living according to God's commandments. That is the best way to safeguard the church against being defiled by the world's immoral values. Young people are especially susceptible to the lure of worldly values and practices that God forbids. We must teach them the importance of obeying God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Dear God, help us to be faithful examples of obedience to Your Word in our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CONCLUSION

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's study will focus on Nehemiah's efforts to assist those who had returned to their homeland to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(April 12-18, 2021)

Nehemiah: The Captive Cupbearer Rebuilds a Nation

MONDAY, April 12: "Daniel Intercedes for Jerusalem" (Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19)

TUESDAY, April 13: "Nehemiah Orders Temple Cleansing and Restoration" (Nehemiah 13:4-9)

WEDNESDAY, April 14: "Nehemiah Restores Ministries of Levites, Singers" (Nehemiah 13:10-14)

THURSDAY, April 15: "Nehemiah Reforms Sabbath Observances and Practices" (Nehemiah 13:15-22)

FRIDAY, April 16: "Nehemiah Sets Standards for Jewish Marriages" (Nehemiah 13:23-27)

SATURDAY, April 17: "Nehemiah Sent to Rebuild Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:1-10)

SUNDAY, April 18: "Nehemiah Inspires the People to Rebuild" (Nehemiah 2:11-20)