

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)

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[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).

PREPARING THE LESSON

- Refer to the *Townsend Press SS Commentary Teacher’s Edition* for an additional lesson plan—with word studies, insights on teaching adults, learner matrices, etc.
- Review last week’s student assignments (“Your Life” and Your World!”).
- Thoroughly review your student book for your adult or young adult class.
- Please note that you have the option of using your subscription bundle supplements, i.e., Lesson Scenario, Student Activity Sheet, SSL-AAG.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

Sometimes, people lose their sense of direction and turn away from the values they once held as sacred. How can we recapture the values we once cherished? After his prayer of confession, Ezra called the former exiles to repentance and led them in worship by reading the Book of the Law.

THE LESSON IN FOCUS

Romans 10:9 reads, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” There are two types of confessions in the life of Christian. The first one initiates a Christian’s spiritual life and the second enables Christians to maintain continuous fellowship with God for the duration of their spiritual journey. Confession of sin requires verified profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. This open confession qualifies the believer to enjoy the blessings of salvation and to assume the responsibilities of faithful discipleship. Because of the ever-present sin nature, every believer is prone to be tempted and to sin against the Word of God. When we do sin, God allows us to restore our fellowship with Him through confessing and turning away from the particular sin that has ensnared us. This type of confession is a genuine acknowledgment of having transgressed God’s Word. Those who come to God with a contrite heart are assured of His forgiveness (see 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32:5). Empty apologies neither move God nor restore fellowship with Him. True confession, the kind God honors, must always be followed by corrective behavior. No one takes a bath to cleanse the body and then puts on dirty clothes. Likewise, confessing sin and continuing to engage in it is a meaningless activity with no spiritual benefit. Open confession is good for the soul, but it must be followed up by turning away from the act of sin and allowing the Holy Spirit to transform and redirect the believer’s walk with Christ.

THE LESSON IN CONTEXT

God knew the hearts of His chosen people, Israel, before He selected them to be His ambassadors among the pagan nations inhabiting Canaan. As part of their covenant with God, Israel was charged to honor Him as the one true God and shun those who worshipped manmade, lifeless idols. As a safeguard against external influences swaying present and future generations of Israelites, God prohibited intermarriage with any of the foreigners they would encounter in Canaan. Biblical history confirms their failure to adhere to this directive and the gradual decline into apostasy that climaxed with the exile of the entire nation into captivity. After the appointed years of exile and the return of some to Judah, many Jews fell back into the pattern of intermarriage with foreign (unbelieving) women. Older Jewish men would divorce their wives and marry younger foreign women. These prohibited unions produced children with mixed religious loyalties and placed severe hardship on the wives. Ezra addressed this issue and led the postexilic remnant to confess their guilt and take steps to correct it in order to restore their fellowship with God.

OPENING INQUIRY

(Choose from the items below.)

1. Why did Ezra oppose and address the practice of intermarriage with foreign women?
2. According to Ezra 9:1-2, who was guilty of the unfaithful practice of intermarriage?
3. In what way does this situation reveal the power of the Word?
4. What qualities of effective spiritual leadership do Ezra and the other leaders demonstrate in the handling of this situation?

INSIGHTS

“Association brings assimilation” is a common phrase used by parents and teachers who warn young people of the risks and dangers of “hanging out with the wrong crowd.” Amazingly and sometimes unconsciously, people find themselves mimicking the behavior and bad habits of those with whom they associate. This common human tendency indicates the importance of making wise and deliberate choices as it relates to friends, partners, associates, mentors, and others who influence our lives. God knew the far-reaching impact that intimate associations would have on the spiritual life of Israel. Consequently, God set forth specific commandments designed to limit intimate social contact and intermarriage with the inhabitants of Canaan. Instead of influencing the spiritual life of their Canaanite neighbors for good, Israel allowed their pagan neighbors to lead them to spiritual compromise and idolatry. It is often said that “forewarned is forearmed,” meaning that prior knowledge of a threat gives one a tactical advantage. It is absolutely essential for parents, teachers, and other faith leaders to consistently teach the importance and necessity of obedience to God, personal sanctification, and the avoidance of ungodly alliances with unbelievers in friendship, fellowship, dating, and marriage.

EXPLORATION

The title of this lesson suggests the importance of open confession (admitting) and repentance (turning away) from sin. Genuine confession must always include corrective behavior to overcome sin. Use this lesson to explain the nature of true repentance versus regret by focusing on the initiative of the community leaders and the people to address the issue of intermarriage with foreigners. The text reveals God’s pattern for addressing sin—conviction and confession, followed by consistent, daily behavior that proves that a particular sin has been abandoned. Discuss the difference between regret and true repentance and the importance of seeing one’s sin as a violation of God’s law. Emphasize that true repentance will always have at its core a sense of brokenness and remorse for having grieved God as demonstrated in the text. Also, focus on the importance of addressing any known sin within the faith community as soon as possible to eliminate its escalation into a more widespread challenge for the leadership and the body of believers.

ADDITIONAL EXPOSITORY INSIGHTS FOR THE TEACHER

Commentary on 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 had a true passion for the knowledge, understanding, and application of God’s Word. His focus was to bring about spiritual reformation among the post-exilic remnant that had returned to Judah and Jerusalem by teaching and explaining the Law. Despite the Israelite affection and attraction to foreign women, mixed marriages represented a serious violation of God’s commandment forbidding covenants with other Canaanite nations. The divine prohibition against intermarriage was to preserve the spiritual integrity of the nation and prevent the worship of foreign gods (see Exodus 34:10-17; Deuteronomy 7:1-5). Ezra’s initial response to his people’s disobedience was an outward expression of the grief he felt because of this sin and the possibility of a repeat of God’s judgment on the nation. He went to God in prayer joined by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, confessing and prostrating himself before the Temple, and bitterly weeping (verse 1). Ezra’s extreme show of contrition demonstrated the seriousness of this sin and prompted the people to join him by confessing their guilt and expressing the desire to repent. One of the leaders, Shechaniah, boldly spoke for the people and admitted their unfaithfulness to God by marrying foreign women and humbly acknowledged the hope of receiving forgiveness (verse 2). As God’s people, they knew that because of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises, the hope of restored fellowship with Him was still possible. The path to forgiveness and restoration is always open to those who genuinely repent of their sins. Shechaniah took the initiative to suggest a corrective solution (verse 3). Staying within the letter of the Law, he suggested that a covenant before God be made to divorce and send away those foreign wives and their children. God hates divorce among believers, thus it is not the norm in God’s Word. But the divorce of foreign marriage was the undoing of a pattern of disobedience that threatened the nation’s spiritual life. God has never approved of being “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14). A sinful choice can only be made right by undoing it. There is rarely ever an easy, convenient way

to undo sin and obedience, especially one that has been long-standing and habitual. Intermarriage was a form of disobedience that posed a serious, far-reaching threat to the nation's spiritual life and affected the credibility of the leadership and their fellowship with God.

The apostle Paul would later teach that a little leaven affects the whole loaf (see 1 Corinthians 5:6), meaning that any sin left unchecked and unaddressed can spread and reap the consequence of God's judgment. The pattern of deliberate disobedience to God's command (especially among the spiritual leaders and officials) could not be allowed to continue. Thus, Shechaniah promised Ezra that the people would support him in the decision to correct the permissive attitude toward the sin of intermarriage (verse 4). Instead of being critical or offended, God's people must commit themselves to standing with their leader when they address and make difficult decisions concerning violations of the Word of God in the faith community. Shechaniah and the supportive remnant are a positive model worthy of imitating.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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.

- **Young Adult Question:**

God reveals His will through His Word. Give an example of issues that prompt people to question or challenge God's will despite clear biblical teaching on the subject.

Commentary on 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 challenged the people to seal their decision by taking a public oath before the Lord. Their willingness to do so proved the sincerity of their confession and repentance (verse 5). True repentance always involves following through with necessary corrective actions. Open confession relieves the stress caused by guilt and opens the way to making a fresh start. However, if nothing is done to turn away from any confessed sin, then forgiveness and restoration will be blocked. Ezra withdrew himself to fast and mourn (verse 6) and sent a proclamation to all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem to carry out the agreed-upon decision within a seventy-two-hour period (verse 7). This was a feasible time frame because the farthest distance anyone would have to travel was between forty and fifty miles. Any who failed to appear faced loss of property and expulsion from the assembly (verse 8). The force of this proclamation may appear too severe to us today, but God has always demanded that His people obey and uphold His standards for holy living. God does not require us to be secret agents who conduct “witch hunts” to ferret out sinners among our local congregations. Instead, He expects that spiritual leaders will teach His commandments, strongly encouraging the visible practice of obedience, biblically addressing any violations with love, and restoring the guilty with compassion. The goal of biblical discipline is to restore believers rather than simply punish or humiliate them. Ezra had the authority to issue the proclamation with a threat of discipline because of Artaxerxes’s edict. God has invested the authority to the church and her leaders to address sin and resolve any other issues that have the potential of discrediting His reputation and damaging the internal fellowship and the external witness of His church.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book’s related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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

- **Young Adult Question:**

Because Ezra took God’s Word seriously, he called the people to a higher standard of spiritual accountability. If he were a member of today’s church, which sins do you think Ezra would call the people to renounce? Explain.

Commentary on 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."

In response to the proclamation, all of the men in Judah and Benjamin assembled in the square east of the Temple (verse 9a). This area was large enough to accommodate several thousand people. The time of their assembly was during the cold, rainy season and a rainstorm was in progress. Their sincerity is again proven by their willingness to expose themselves to this less-than-favorable weather condition (verse 9b). How ironic that we have some of the most comfortable edifices and just the threat of rain will prevent some of us from gathering to hear the Word of God. The people trembled not only because of inclement weather conditions, but also because of their distress over being out of fellowship with God and fear of His wrath. Ezra boldly addressed the assembly and cited their sin of unfaithfulness, identified their guilt, and challenged them to acknowledge their sin to God and to do something about it by separating themselves from their foreign wives (verse 11). Ezra's challenge called the people to demonstrate two essential elements of repentance: agreeing with God about sin, followed by righteous action to separate themselves from the sin. True repentance is always followed by an intentional action involving a change of mind, attitude, direction, and behavior. If not, it is nothing more than a passing feeling of shame or regret. Recognizing that sin is actually an offense against God humbles the inner man and leads to the desire to restore fellowship with God and to change (see Psalm 51:1-12). The

remnant's genuine repentance was proven by their fervent agreement and readiness to implement the suggested plan of action (verse 12).

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

• Adult Questions:

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?

• Young Adult Question:

Give examples of a right and wrong way to respond to God's Word. Briefly explain your answers.

LIFE APPLICATION

• Refer to Adult Book

(See student lesson's "Your Life" section.)

—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.

(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)

—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 from 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.

• Refer to Young Adult Book

(See student lesson's "Your Life" section.)

—All of God's commandments are righteous (see Psalm 119:172). God's Word should move us to consider our actions and confront any known sin. As Ezra encouraged the men of Israel to conform their lives to God's Word, take an honest look at your life and consider which of your actions contradict God's commandments.

(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)

—Ezra served God by working to restore the covenant life of God's people in Judah. He exercised strong spiritual leadership by showing faithfulness to God's law. Have you fully committed yourself to serving God by living in ways that prove your faithfulness to God's Word?

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

The lesson topic for Sunday, April 18, 2021, is "Initiating Renewal." The Devotional Reading is Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19, the Background Scriptures are Nehemiah 2:11-20; 13:1-22, and the Printed Text is Nehemiah 2:11-20.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives that prompts us to repent and seek Your forgiveness when we sin. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(April 19-25, 2021)

Jeremiah Pleads for Restoration

MONDAY, April 19: “Praise for God’s Wonderful Works” (Psalm 111)

TUESDAY, April 20: “God’s Blessings Intended for All” (Zechariah 8:18-23)

WEDNESDAY, April 21: “The Lord, Our Sovereign” (Psalm 102:12-22)

THURSDAY, April 22: “Plea for Mercy for Jerusalem” (Psalm 79)

FRIDAY, April 23: “Mourn the Destruction of Zion” (Jeremiah 9:17-22)

SATURDAY, April 24: “God’s Mercy and Love Never Ends” (Lamentations 3:22-33)

SUNDAY, April 25: “Remember and Restore Us” (Lamentations 5:1-22)