

April 11 Lesson 6 (NIV)

THE FAITH-IN-ACTION PREACHER

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezekiel 18:25–32

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 9–10

EZRA 10:1–12

¹ 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 Shekariah 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.”

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.

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.”

KEY VERSE

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. —Ezra 10:6

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

Unit 2: Prophets of Restoration

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Ezra's reaction to the people's sin.
2. Explain why intermarriage with foreigners caused Ezra grief.
3. Write a confession to God for a specific sin and a corresponding course of repentant action.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Way of Escape
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Conviction of Sin (Ezra 10:1–4)
 - A. Confession and Weeping (v. 1)
The Power of Confession
 - B. Covenant and Courage (vv. 2–4)
- II. Call to Appear (Ezra 10:5–8)
 - A. Everyone Promises (v. 5)
 - B. Ezra Mourns (v. 6)
 - C. Proclamation Issued (vv. 7–8)
- III. Call to Action (Ezra 10:9–12)
 - A. Fearful People (v. 9)
 - B. Fearless Preacher (vv. 10–11)
 - C. Faithful Practice (v. 12)
“Good Sermon Today, Preacher!”

Conclusion

- A. Content with Mere Conviction?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AssyrianUh-sear-ee-un.

BabylonianBab-ih-low-nee-un.

CyrusSigh-russ.

EliashibE-lye-uh-shib.

Hezekiah *Hez-ih-kye-uh*.

Jehiel *Jay-hi-eel*.

Jehohanan *Jeh-ho-hay-nan*.

Josiah *Jo-sigh-uh*.

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-**nez**-er*.

Nehemiah *Nee-huh-**my**-uh*.

Shekariah *She-kawn-yay*.

Introduction

A. The Way of Escape

Escape rooms are becoming a fun-time phenomenon for a variety of ages. The premise is simple. A group of people pay to be locked in a room and left with a series of clues and hints to utilize in solving a creative puzzle in order to escape. This is all done with a given time limit that is certain to get the blood pumping as the clock ticks down and pressure mounts.

Now, imagine that a lone figure in the corner actually has the answers to provide the way out. In fact, the group was told upon entering that someone had the answers they needed. Who in their right mind would hear that kind of information and not use it to ensure the success of the group? Victory is on the line!

There are times in relationship with God when people essentially lock themselves up and put their lives on the line. Yet, when solutions are offered for real problems, people have a choice: to listen to their guide or to go it alone. Will the solution be applied or not?

B. Lesson Context

Under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire overtook Jerusalem and exiled the people of Israel in 586 BC (see lesson 8 Lesson Context). Eventually, the Persian King Cyrus defeated Babylon. He released Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem in 538 BC for the express purpose of rebuilding the temple (see Ezra 10:1a, below). Following that first wave of returning exiles in 538 BC was a second led by Ezra in 458 BC (7:7, 13). He desired to restore the people to a state of faithful adherence to God's law (7:25–27). The third and final wave of exiles returned to Jerusalem in 444 BC, led by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:1–9; see lesson 7).

Ezra was a teacher of the Law of Moses, commissioned by God (Ezra 7:6). Ezra was made aware that the people of Israel had committed grave sins (chapter 9). The most glaring infraction was that they had intermarried with people groups outside of Israel (Deuteronomy 7:3). This prohibition was not based on any racial or ethnic enmity. Rather, God warned in Deuteronomy

7:4 that foreign faiths “will turn your children away from following me” (compare 2 Corinthians 6:14–18). Yet even as they returned from exile for sin, men of Judah were marrying pagan women! If these men were divorcing Jewish wives as well, the result was abuse of divorce laws and resulting hardship for the former wives (compare Malachi 2:13–16; Matthew 19:1–9). Ezra’s reaction to the people’s disobedience serves as the subject of today’s lesson.

I. Conviction of Sin

(EZRA 10:1–4)

A. Confession and Weeping (v. 1)

1a. While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God,

After the initial shock of the report *Ezra* received (see Lesson Context), he immediately took it to heart. Ezra led by example. The sincerity of his distress over Judah’s sins is emphasized by the intensifying verbs used to describe his actions (compare Nehemiah 1:3–6). Ezra’s physical posture matched his spiritual posture before the Lord. Both body and spirit were marked by brokenness and sorrow.

The house of God refers to the temple that had been rebuilt after Solomon’s temple was destroyed in the Babylonian conquest (2 Chronicles 36:19; Ezra 3:7–13; 6:13–18). Construction was completed in 515 BC, and this second temple stood until the Romans destroyed it in AD 70.

1b. a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.

People of all ages need good leaders. This is as true in the area of repentance as anything else. When charting revivals in the Old Testament, movements toward God often started with one leader feeling a burden (examples: 1 Samuel 7; 2 Kings 22:1–23:30; 2 Chronicles 29–31). Though the circumstances varied, the initiating factor for revival was someone acting on behalf of the people. The leaders may have had a private revelation or realization, followed by the gathering of an assembly, as here in verse 1. Here, Ezra’s own conviction and contrition became an example for others to gather before the Lord and weep over their sins.

B. Covenant and Courage (vv. 2–4)

2a. Then Shekariah 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.

In the Old Testament, there are at least nine men named *Shekariah*, nine named *Jehiel*, and eight named *Elam*. Sorting them out is difficult! The Shekariah who speaks here is a descendant of David according to 1 Chronicles 3:1, 21–22. His father, Jehiel, was likely also the father of Obadiah, one of the returning exiles (Ezra 8:9). Jehiel is included in a grouping of those guilty of intermarriage (Ezra 10:17–18, 26, not in our printed text). It is plausible that Shekariah overcame personal and familial shame to speak up and not attempt to cover up his family’s sin.

The Hebrew word translated *been unfaithful* regularly denotes the violation of a covenant relationship or other expected behavior in the Old Testament (example: 1 Chronicles 5:25).

Marital unfaithfulness is a frequent analogy regarding Israel's relationship with God, with Israel being the adulterous wife (see Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 3:8; Ezekiel 16:22–38).

The *foreign women* were those not part of the covenant people. Israel had been repeatedly warned that *the peoples around* them in Canaan would lead them into apostasy (Deuteronomy 7:1–4; Joshua 23:12–13). Whether these particular wives were guilty of such a thing is unknown. However, the sad example of Solomon—the wise king whose foreign wives “turned his heart after other gods” (1 Kings 11:4)—should have stood as a grave warning in the time after the exile. Ezra's contemporary Nehemiah reminded the people of Solomon's failure, exhorting them not to suffer the same fate (Nehemiah 13:26–27).

2b. “But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

A repentant heart is what makes *hope* possible for right relations with God to be restored. God's patience with his people is demonstrated time and again throughout the Old Testament. The prophets often invoked past episodes of God's gracious deliverance in order to motivate the people toward obedience. Ezra reminded the remnant in Jerusalem that “you [God] have punished us less than our sins deserved” (Ezra 9:13).

Hope is always grounded in the possibility of God's mercy. After a moral failure or personal tragedy, hope exists because, as King David learned firsthand, God is “good, and what [he does] is good” (Psalm 119:68). Hope grounded in God's goodness led others to write of God's being gracious, slow to anger, and full of mercy (see Psalms 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

3a. “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.

Now signals a step forward from the sins of the past and present, as defined in Ezra 10:2. This suggestion from Shekariah is drastic and may appear cruel to modern readers. Some might wonder if God really wanted the men to *send away* their wives and *their children*, considering Deuteronomy 21:10–14. But in the days following the return from Babylon, the people were very aware of how unfaithfulness had led to their removal from the promised land. Foreign women could very well lead their husbands back into idolatry, as had happened to King Solomon. Thus the threat the foreign wives posed was too great to ignore. The people had to be intent on being holy in order to please God.

We should note that God's covenant people were not to mistreat non-Israelites who lived among them—quite the opposite (see Leviticus 19:33–34; 23:22)! But treating non-Israelites with kindness isn't in the same category as intermarriage. The extraordinary circumstances the people faced called for extraordinary action.

Shekariah referred to Ezra deferentially as *my lord*. This acknowledged Ezra's authority to decide and lead the people based on what he believed was right. Ezra, after all, was both student and teacher of the Law of Moses. His conclusions on this matter were well-informed.

Reverence and awe were given to God's words as if God himself were present. God helps those “who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at [God's] word” (Isaiah 66:2).

3b. “Let it be done according to the Law.

In view is the law that forbade certain marital unions (see Lesson Context). Notable law-breakers in this regard included Salmon (who married Rahab, a Canaanite) and Boaz (who married Ruth, a Moabite). These two women are honored as ancestors of Jesus himself (Joshua 2:1; Ruth 4:10; Matthew 1:5). But the captivity from which the Jews had returned was a vivid

reminder of the dangers of idolatry. Maybe some non-Jewish wives were exceptions to the rule, like Rahab and Ruth. But the law existed because such cases *were* exceptions, not the rule. And we also note that Rahab and Ruth professed allegiance to God in both word and action (Joshua 2:11; Ruth 1:16).

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

We can only imagine the overwhelmingly emotional toll of separating from one’s wife and children. The difficulty of the demand is what brought forth the strong imperative *Rise up*. This marks the beginning of the shift from conviction to action on the part of the leaders.

II. Call to Appear

(EZRA 10:5–8)

A. Everyone Promises (v. 5)

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.

Ezra made sure that *the leading priests and Levites and all Israel* were on the same page. Opposition to the task ahead had to be absolutely minimized (see Ezra 10:15)! So the leaders and lay people made a covenant with God to “send away all these women and their children” (10:3).

B. Ezra Mourns (v. 6)

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.

During this emotional day, *Ezra* withdrew to be alone in the dwelling of *Jehohanan*. That man and his father, *Eliashib*, were Levites (Nehemiah 12:23). We recall that all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

While the people were grieved and motivated to action, *Ezra* was overcome with his own grief regarding *the unfaithfulness of the exiles*. His fast from *food* and *water* seems to have been spontaneous, a result of the pain in his spirit. When we think of mourning, it is usually in relation to death—the loss of a loved one or someone special. *Ezra* carried a sense of loss as he reflected on years his people wasted as they chased false gods and denied the Lord.

C. Proclamation Issued (vv. 7–8)

7–8. A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. 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.

It is likely that Ezra gave special charge to the leading priests and Levites to spread news of the need to *assemble in Jerusalem*. Besides their leadership function, priests and Levites lived among all the tribes (Joshua 14:1–4).

Three days was a quick turnaround for a message to be proclaimed and journeys to be undertaken through all *Judah* and back to *Jerusalem*. But the speed with which repentance and action would happen throughout would indicate the importance the people put on rectifying their wrongs.

The severe consequences for not coming to Jerusalem also reveals the seriousness of the people's resolution. Forfeiting one's land and possessions and being cut off from *the assembly* would be the same treatment the foreign wives experienced. Those so penalized would have to find their homes elsewhere, away from God's people.

III. Call to Action (EZRA 10:9–12)

A. Fearful People (v. 9)

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.

Ten of the 12 tribes of Israel had been removed to Assyrian exile more than 180 years previous (2 Kings 17:6). So only the two tribes of *Judah and Benjamin*, having returned from Babylonian exile, remained to answer the call to come to *Jerusalem*.

The twentieth day of the ninth month corresponds to early December. *Rain* is normal at that point in the year. So in addition to the spiritual distress, there was also physical shivering in the cold, heavy rain.

How often the spiritual and physical overlap! Distress to one's body, whether in the form of illness, injury, or mere discomfort, often goes hand in hand with spiritual distress. Sometimes one results in the other; at other times they seem to have independent causes, but the presence of both multiplies the misery. In such conditions *all the people* sat outside and waited.

B. Fearless Preacher (vv. 10–11)

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.

Sometimes *Ezra* is referred to as *the priest* (here and in Ezra 10:16), sometimes he is referred to as "the teacher of the Law" (Nehemiah 8:1, 4; 12:36), and sometimes by both of those terms together (Ezra 7:11, 21; Nehemiah 8:9; 12:26). His statement *adding to Israel's guilt* implies that the people hadn't learned the lesson of the exile. Instead of working to decrease sin, they were working for the opposite (compare 2 Chronicles 28:13). So Ezra restated the charge (compare Ezra 10:2a, above).

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."

Their first response to conviction was to *honor the Lord* by admitting wrongdoing, a necessary step toward reconciliation with God (compare 1 John 1:9). The next step is to follow through *and do his will*, that is, what he commanded in the first place, what he has desired all along.

To be required to separate *from [their] foreign wives* was not necessarily a judgment on any specific conduct on the wives' part since no such conduct is listed. Instead, those wives were assumed to retain the priorities and religious practices of *the peoples* of the land among whom they had grown up. Only by severing their influence could the men of Judah and Benjamin be certain that the wives wouldn't tempt them to idolatry.

C. Faithful Practice (v. 12)

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

Concluding this part of the text is the *loud voice* of a unified people who experienced conviction of sin. Ezra's leadership helped foster that commitment. Any spiritual leader worth following will always direct people to God and his glory only.

Conclusion

A. Content with Mere Conviction?

One of the great gifts for Christian instruction in the Old Testament is seeing episode after episode of Israel's rebellion against God and God's subsequent restoration of his covenant people. In today's text, we have been party to yet another instance of this. The people of God were again in danger of sliding back into idolatry because of their disobedience to God's law. This is a reminder that God's laws are put in place for our good and his glory. Like the ancient Jews, we too are tempted by the culture that surrounds us—including the temptation to marry unbelievers (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

God's mercy provided hope for Israel to be restored to a right relationship with him. But that required someone who would take the lead! Not everyone is gifted in the same way in this regard, and different leaders may respond differently to the same problem. (It's rather humorous to contrast Ezra's leadership style in Ezra 9:3 with that of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 13:25.) But it all begins with having a burden of the heart and soul.

God's forgiving grace is available to us because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church is his bride (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17). May we be faithful to our bridegroom!

B. Prayer

Dear Father, guard our hearts against rationalizing our sins! Convict us so that repentant action may follow! May your Word ever guide us to be faithful. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Action is the hallmark of true conviction.¹

¹ Mitchell, P., Boatman, C. R., Taylor, M. A., & Hee, S. (2021). [The Faith-in-Action Preacher](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 273–279). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.