

Ezra Grasps a Nettle

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn, shall we, to our Bibles now and to God's Word. And we're reading in Ezra, chapter 9 and 10.

Edward is concluding our study in this book. You'll find it on page 395 if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles. And we'll read chapters 9 and most of chapter 10.

Although you may be almost as glad as I am that I'm not going to read through all the great long list of names right at the very end. Important as they are.

So Ezra, chapter 9, then, at verse 1. And you remember last time we were reading about all the people of Israel gathered to hear God's Word read, to hear the Law of Moses, to have it explained to them so that they understood it and took it to heart.

And 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 land with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

[1 : 21] For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that 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. As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my beard and head and sat appalled.

Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, they gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

And at the evening sacrifice, 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, saying, Oh my God, I'm 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. From the days of our fathers to this day, we have been in great guilt.

[2 : 31] And for our iniquities, we, our kings and our priests, have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the swords, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame as it is today. 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 this holy place that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.

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.

And now, O God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 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.

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.

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 deserve, and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again, and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations?

[4 : 17] Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? 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. While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men and women and children gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.

And Shekariah, the son of Jehiel, the son 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. 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. Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you. Be strong and do it.

[5 : 33] Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. And so they took the oath.

Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehochanan, the son of Elishab, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

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

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. 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.

[6 : 54] 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. Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, It is so.

We must do as you have said. But the people are many, and it's a time of heavy rain. We cannot stand in the open, nor is this the task for one day or for two.

For we have greatly transgressed in this matter. 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 the judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.

Only Jonathan, the son of Asahel, and Jehaziah, the son of Tikva, opposed this, and Meshulam and Shabbati, the Levite, supported them.

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.

[8 : 01] On the first day of the tenth month, they sat down to examine the matter, and by the first of the first month, they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

Now there were found some of the priests, and a list of their names, and of the Levites, and their names, and of Israel. All these names.

And verse 44 sums up, All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even born children. Amen.

And may God bless to us this, His Word, help us to understand it, and hear His Word to us today. Amen. Well, let's turn to our passage in the book of Ezra, chapters 9 and 10, on page 395, if you have one of our hardback Bibles.

My title for this morning is Ezra Grasps a Nettle. I wonder if I'd be right in guessing that while our passage was read out earlier in the service, you began to feel rather uncomfortable.

[9 : 22] And perhaps you experienced one of the following two reactions. First, you might have thought, why did this passage have to be included at all in the book of Ezra?

After all, chapter 8, which we read last week, was so positive and happy, describing the triumphant return of Ezra to Jerusalem with a large number of Israelites who were courageously making the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

They put their best foot forward, they trusted the Lord, they fasted, they prayed for protection, and the Lord brought them safely to the promised land, back to their beloved city, where they lived, as far as we know, happily ever after.

So we might think, could not the story have been ended there? Was it necessary to tell the world about this unhappy business of divorcing foreign wives?

Well, that's the first possible reaction. Why include this story at all? Now, the second reaction you might have had would be to say, but how dare Ezra tell people whom to marry and whom not to marry?

[10:29] Isn't that a shocking infringement of personal liberty? Isn't it completely out of sympathy, in any case, with the modern world? In the modern world, we have such enlightened and liberal views about marriage.

A man may marry whomever he wants to. He can marry a woman, he can even marry a man these days. Perhaps legislation will soon be passed enabling him to marry his dog or his budgerigar.

So the idea that anybody should put restrictions on whom a person can marry is intolerable in the modern world. Let's take the first of those two reactions first, the idea that it might have been better not to include the story at all.

Well, the Bible, Praise God, is a warts and all book. It never whitewashes or airbrushes the character and actions of the people of God. And that is a great relief, surely, to all of us.

Jesus is the friend of sinners. That's why he's my friend. The Bible shows us the nature of sin in graphic detail. Paul describes himself as the chief of sinners.

[11:38] Think of the great apostle Peter. His frailties are put on view for the world to see. Even the greatest men of the Old Testament, like Abraham and Moses, have faults and moral compromises written up in plain language.

David and Solomon, Israel's two greatest kings, are shown to have deeply flawed characters. And although it's painful to us, it is necessary for us and good for us to be shown how God's people can go badly wrong because it helps us to see the nature and the possibilities of sin in our own hearts, it acts as a warning to us not to behave in similar ways.

So a passage like Ezra 9 and 10 shows us both sin and repentance and progress in godliness. The repentance leads to change, to a greater corporate desire in the people of God to honor him and to live by his standards, which are so different from the standards of the world.

So it is good for us to read a passage like this, even though it's not very comfortable to be probed by the message. It's a bit like the unpleasant-tasting medicine that a mother sometimes has to give to a young child.

You must take your medicine, Toby. I don't want to, Mom. It's nasty. But you must, my boy. It's good for you. It's a bit like that. So let's thank God for including this passage because it teaches us about sin and repentance and change.

[13:08] We're all sinners and we need regular reminders of the importance of ongoing repentance and ongoing change. Repentance is not just for the beginning of the Christian life. It's a way of life.

It has to go on. Now let's turn to the second reaction that we might have felt. That for Ezra to tell these men to divorce their wives was a horrible thing to do.

Especially when you remember that through the prophet Malachi, virtually a contemporary, of Ezra's, God says, I hate divorce. And also when you remember Jesus' attitude, how he upheld the permanence of marriage, how he said, what God has joined together, let not man separate.

Well now, what is the issue here in Ezra 9 and 10? It may not be quite as obvious as it seems. Look with me at chapter 9, verse 3. Ezra, obviously, is writing in the first person.

As soon as I heard this, this news, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. What was it that made this godly man, Ezra, when he heard about it, react so strongly to tear his clothes and the very hair of his head, a very painful expression of grief and sorrow?

[14:27] Look on to verse 4. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles.

Now, that is the issue, faithlessness or infidelity, being unfaithful to God. Look on to chapter 10, verse 2. 10-2. Where Shekariah, who's one of the leaders there in Israel, comes and speaks to Ezra.

And he says to Ezra, we have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land. So the issue is breaking faith or unfaithfulness to God, not being true and loyal to the covenant relationship which is described and detailed in the Law of Moses.

So let's dig into this a little bit further. The issue was not simply about Jews marrying Gentiles. It was not an issue about racial purity, about keeping Jewish blood undiluted by Gentile blood.

Just think back into the Old Testament for a while. Think of Joseph, the great patriarch. He was sent down to Egypt, found himself going to Egypt because of his brother's action. He discovered many years later that it was because of the providence and kindness of God that he'd been sent there to preserve the people of Israel.

[15 : 49] But when he was there in Egypt as a young man, the pharaoh arranged a marriage for him to a woman called Asenath whose father was a pagan Egyptian priest. And this Egyptian wife provided Joseph with two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh who gave their names to two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Think of Moses. He fled from Egypt into the deserts of Midian and he married a Midianite woman, Zipporah, who bore him two sons. Think of Rahab, the Canaanite from Jericho.

Think of Ruth, the Moabitess who became the great-grandmother of King David. Both Rahab and Ruth feature in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1.

There was no fundamental rule in the law of Moses against marrying a Gentile on the grounds of racial purity. In fact, there was even a law in Deuteronomy chapter 21 which said this, that if you had an Israelite soldier who in battle had captured a Gentile woman, he could take her home as a prisoner of war and then he could marry her if he wanted to as long as she took certain ritual steps to separate herself from her own people because then she would be fully incorporated into the Israelite people and her children would be counted as full Israelites.

Think back to the original covenant that the Lord God made with Abraham. It was a promise of great blessing and it came out in three ways. The blessing of a land promised, the promised land, the blessing of the people, the Jewish nation, and the blessing to the Gentiles, salvation blessings to the Gentiles through the Jews.

[17 : 35] Now God said that to Abraham in about 1900 BC. Come forward about 1200 years to the prophet Isaiah in about 700 BC. He wrote this in his 56th chapter.

The foreigners who joined themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants. These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Jesus himself picked that up much later. So the Old Testament repeatedly tells us that God's loving purpose is to include many Gentiles as well as Jews in the role of God's elected and saved people.

Now having said that, there are passages in the Law of Moses which command the Israelites not to intermarry with the Canaanite tribes. But the reason for that command is not to do with racial purity. It's to do with something else. Let me read you a few verses from Deuteronomy chapter 7 and you'll see what Moses is concerned about. He says this, When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you're entering to take possession of it and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, you must devote them to complete destruction.

[19 : 00] You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons for they would turn your sons from following me to serve other gods.

This then is how you must deal with them. You shall break down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars, and chop down their asherim and burn their carved images with fire for you are a people holy to the Lord your God.

The issue then is not racial purity, it's idolatry and false religion. The danger is that young Israelite men and women would intermarry with Canaanites and they would start worshipping their gods and following their religious practices which included such things as fertility orgies and child sacrifice.

And it was those sort of things that the Israelites had been indulging in for centuries. It was because they'd been turning to all this idolatry again and again that God had finally punished them by sending them into exile.

And this is what Ezra is talking about in his great prayer that begins at verse 6 in chapter 9. I'll try and give you a paraphrase of the prayer. What he's saying is this, Lord, because of our real guilt you punished us justly and sent us away into exile.

[20 : 25] And then you blessed us and favoured us quite beyond anything we deserved because you brought a remnant of your people back to Jerusalem. You gave us, in the words of verse 8, a secure hold.

That's a phrase from pitching tents. It means you put down your tent peg securely once again in your holy place in Jerusalem. And now you've given us a season of reviving or revival.

You've given us favour in the eyes of the Persian Empire. And you've allowed us to return, to rebuild the temple, to get started again as your people in the promised land. And what are we doing?

We're repeating the same dreadful, sinful process. We're forsaking your commandments again, verse 11, which you commanded. Let me just read from verse 11.

The commandments which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, the land that you're entering to take possession of it is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations.

[21 : 25] That's their religious practices, that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore, for that reason, 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.

And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, that's the exile, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved, and have given us such a remnant as this, 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? 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 of us can stand before you because of this. Do you feel his pain? This is why, to go back to verse 3, he sat appalled and tore his clothes and the very hairs of his head.

But the issue is not racial purity. It's what he calls in verse 11 the abominations and uncleanness of the religious practices of these Gentile nations.

[22 : 47] It's not about purity of race. It's about purity of faith and personal conduct. Now, just what the implications of all this might be for us, we'll come on to a little bit later.

But let's drill down further first into what was going on here. And let's notice two things. First, the convicting power of God's law.

Just think back to the whole of this book of Ezra. Why was Ezra sent by God to Jerusalem in 458 BC? It was to teach the law of God, the law of Moses.

We saw this very clearly. You might just look back to chapter 7, verse 10, which gives us a succinct portrait, a pen portrait of who Ezra was and what he'd come to do.

7, 10. He'd set his heart to study the law of the Lord, to do it, so that he could teach his statutes and rules in Israel. The exile had ended about 80 years earlier, back in 539 BC.

[23 : 51] That's when the Jews began to return to Jerusalem. They had the temple rebuilt and up and running by 515 BC. But it seems in the years that followed that the teaching of God's word and law had fallen into disrepair.

So Ezra was sent many years later, 458 BC, to teach the law of God. Now, what is the purpose of teaching the law of God?

What effect does the law of God have on those who are taught it? Well, broadly speaking, the law of God does three things. First, it blesses society by restraining sin.

It teaches people the difference between right and wrong. So, for example, it teaches us that society will be much happier and more secure if we refrain from murdering each other, from adultery, from stealing, lying, and coveting people's property.

So it restrains sin and reduces crime. Second, it brings conviction of sin. In other words, we read it, we hear it taught, and we realize the folly and wickedness in our own hearts.

[25 : 00] It troubles our conscience. It makes us cry out, Lord, I'm a sinner. And thirdly, the law shows us how to live. It teaches us how to live a happy and productive and godly life.

It teaches us how to love God and how to love our neighbors. Now, it's the second of those three purposes of God's law which is at work here in Ezra chapter 9.

It's the power of the law to bring conviction of sin. Just look again at chapter 9, verses 1 and 2. Chapter 9, 1 and 2.

Leaders of the Jews approach Ezra. They're described as officials. They might have been priests or Levites. They might have been lay people with administrative responsibilities.

But whoever they are, they come to Ezra with this bombshell of a message. Now, why do they come and tell him? Why do they not simply say to each other, we'll not mention it to the old man because it might upset him too much?

[26 : 04] Why do they drop into his lap this message which they know is going to cause him such pain? Well, surely, because his teaching, his thorough teaching of the law of Moses has been convicting them of their sin.

Their consciences are deeply troubled. They know that something needs to be done about this very wrong situation. Verse 3 makes it clear that Ezra himself knew nothing about what was going on.

This thing came at him right out of the blue. It reminds me of a number of things that happened to me years ago when I was a parish minister in England. I can still picture some of these moments when perhaps a senior member of the church would come to me and say, Edward, there is something I'm afraid that I have to tell you about a member of our church.

And my heart used to sink into my boots when somebody spoke like that because I knew that I was about to be presented with a nettle that would have to be grasped. Pastoral discipline is essential in a Christian church.

In fact, without it, a church cannot be healthy. But grasping nettles can be very painful. Well, Ezra's nettle was a much bigger one than anything I ever had to face. But the reason for it coming to the surface at this point was surely Ezra's own thoroughgoing teaching and preaching of the law.

[27 : 26] He'd been pressing the law of Moses into the people perhaps for some months now. And the law was convicting them of their sin and reviving their consciences which had obviously lain dormant for some time.

Verse 4 in chapter 9 that gives us a fuller flavor of what happened on that day because it shows us that Ezra was not alone in his godly reaction. Verse 4 says, Then all who trembled not just Ezra but 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.

How grateful Ezra must have been for their company and their support. We learn more about the scene if we turn on to chapter 10 verse 1. 10-1 While Ezra was praying and making confession and 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.

So there were many there weeping with Ezra even children. Can you picture it? Can you imagine the noise these men, women and children sobbing the sobbing voices of hundreds of men and of women and even of little children's voices.

And did you notice that revealing phrase at the beginning of verse 4 in chapter 9 chapter 9 verse 4 all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel.

[29 : 01] They were the ones who gathered around Ezra and wept with him because they shared his view of the holiness of God. They realized that God was not to be trifled with.

It may be that Ezra knew the words of Isaiah. He probably read Isaiah many times because Isaiah puts these words into the mouth of God in his 66th chapter. This is the one to whom I look says God the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Let me ask friends do you tremble at the words of God? What a blessing it will be to me and to you if we can learn to tremble at the words of God.

We shan't trifle with him then. So there's the first thing. Ezra preaches the law of God and it brings conviction of sin and it's that that leads to confession and repentance and revival.

Now secondly let's notice the godly process by which repentance is facilitated. These two chapters put the spotlight mainly on Ezra but they also show us how the whole community responded to the crisis.

[30 : 17] Let's follow the story through and see excuse me see how it unfolds. First Ezra sets the direction for the right response.

In these first two verses of chapter 9 the leaders come to him and they tell him what's going on. Now if he'd been a different kind of leader he might have said to them well now tell me how many Israelite men are involved in this practice of marrying Canaanite women and they would have replied about a hundred.

I don't guess that you counted the names at the end of chapter 10 but if you do count them there are about a hundred involved. Now the whole community in Jerusalem at this time would have numbered 50 or 60,000 people.

If Ezra had been a less godly leader he might have said to these men only a hundred it's quite a small number isn't it not much more than a drop in a bucket. I think brothers we should take the rough with the smooth let's keep this information to ourselves least said soonest mended we don't need to open a can of worms at this early stage of rebuilding the community do we?

But that was not Ezra's response. He could instantly see that here was a corrupting influence seeping into the Lord's community and he knew that it had to be stopped.

[31 : 41] Godly leadership is like that. When a problem emerges it has to be addressed fully and quickly. If it's not addressed the community or the congregation will lose its fear of God and will begin to think that anything goes that any kind of behavior is acceptable.

Years ago I remember being at a conference for Church of England senior pastors vicars and I was one of a group of ministers who were having a discussion together about what to do if our assistant minister stepped out of line in some serious way and began to misbehave.

I was only 30 something but there was a much older man in this group who was responsible for a large parish in a big town and he said this what my assistant minister does in his own time is entirely his business and not mine.

As long as he works properly during his working hours I take no interest in his life outside he can behave as he wishes. Now this man made no pretense of being an evangelical as I'm sure you'll understand but even so I was shocked by such a cavalier and irresponsible attitude.

Ezra is the complete opposite of that. The way his fellow Jews behave is a matter of the deepest concern to him because God's honor is at stake and God's honor is upheld when the law of Moses is taught and followed.

[33 : 12] So Ezra as the leader of the community sets the direction for how the community should respond. When the other people see how seriously he addresses the problem and how deeply moved and distressed he is they know that they must follow his example because they know that he is a man who knows the Lord.

Secondly many other leaders work with Ezra alongside him to grasp the nettle. Look at the speech in chapter 10 verses 2 to 4 that Shekariah makes to Ezra.

Chapter 10 verses 2 to 4. If I had been Ezra I would have been enormously encouraged to hear what Shekariah says. Verse 2 he says 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.

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.

Arise for it is your task and we are with you. Be strong and do it. Now that verse 4 I think is a terrific verse. It's a real shot of adrenaline for Ezra.

[34 : 35] Arise says Shekariah because it's your task you're our leader Ezra therefore you must do what needs to be done but he goes straight on to say we are with you. We will work with you.

We'll shoulder this responsibility with you. We won't leave you to do all the difficult stuff by yourself. We're with you. You can be strong therefore and face this task. Now it's a great model for how leadership works in the Lord's people.

There's a senior leader with whom the buck stops but he is supported by co-leaders who wholeheartedly share his commitment to the Lord's teaching and are prepared to roll up their sleeves and work hard with him so as to solve the presenting problem.

Jesus had 12 apostles who worked with him and he appointed many other missionaries. Think of Paul that great missionary leader. He was at the center of a very large network of like-minded missionaries scattered all over the Mediterranean.

They believed the same message and they taught the same gospel. A local congregation like ours needs a senior leader who is surrounded and supported by others who share and understand the same gospel and who are willing to support him and work closely with him.

[35 : 50] Now in Ezra's case this close support was exactly what he needed and it enabled him to address the problem in a thorough going steady manner until everything was fully sorted out a number of months later.

And then thirdly a plan is made and is then carefully followed through. Chapter 10 verse 5 Then Ezra arose.

That's a great verb. In other words he stood up he immediately addressed the crisis and he made all the leaders take an oath to do as Shekariah had said. That is, verse 3, to make a covenant with God to divorce the Canaanite wives.

Then in verse 6, Ezra spent a night in prayer and mourning. And in verse 7, a proclamation is then made throughout the whole country that everybody, everybody, all the returned exiles, not just those who've married the foreign women, that 100 or so, but everybody should come to Jerusalem within three days so that the whole matter should be faced by the whole community.

everybody needed to know what had gone wrong and what steps of repentance were to be taken. So it wasn't dealt with behind closed doors with only the transgressors being summoned to Jerusalem.

[37 : 09] No, the whole community needed to be involved so that everybody together should learn the fundamental importance of obeying the law of the Lord. So the assembly gathers in verse 9 within the three appointed days, and you'll see that at one level, it's a scene of wretchedness and misery.

As verse 9 tells us, the huge crowd is sitting in the open square, trembling because of the problem that's being addressed, but also because it's pouring with rain.

It was late in the ninth month, it was winter, everybody's sitting there bedraggled and soaking and shivering. But at another level, it's a wonderful scene because Ezra is leading the people back to the Lord.

In verse 10, he tells them very bluntly about their sin. And then he says, confess your sin and make the necessary divorces. And they all answer in a loud voice, we will.

But Ezra, cut us an inch of slack. It's pouring with rain here. We're feeling awful. We can't sort this out in five minutes, but let due process run its course. We'll work out a timetable and the offenders can come city by city and we'll sort the matter out until look at verse 15, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.

[38 : 32] Ezra was teaching the people to understand the wrath of God, as any responsible Christian leader will also do today. And so it all happened.

Ezra selected responsible senior men to oversee the divorce procedures. The work began some ten days later, and within three months it was completed. It was a very painful nettle, but it had to be grasped.

And an example had to be made of these men who had acted wrongly. And that's why their names are all listed at the end. They are being named and shamed.

So it's a story about the convicting power of God's law. It's a story about godly leadership, which brings about constructive corporate repentance.

Well, friends, let me finish with a question and two encouragements. First, the question. Do these chapters teach us that a Christian who is married to a non-Christian should divorce the non-Christian?

[39 : 39] Well, the answer is a very definite no. Think of the teaching of both Peter and Paul in their New Testament letters. They both address the situation of believers married to unbelievers because that was an increasingly common thing in New Testament times as the gospel spread into the Gentile world.

And both Peter and Paul taught married Christians stick with your unbelieving spouse and seek to win him or her to Christ by your godly and loving behavior.

If you want to follow that study up, you'll find Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 and Peter's in 1 Peter chapter 3. Now, that's the Bible's teaching about an already existing marriage, a marriage between two non-Christians where one spouse becomes a Christian but the other doesn't.

However, getting married, taking the step of getting married to a non-Christian if you're already a Christian, that is a completely different matter. Don't do that or your Christian life will fall apart. If you're a Christian and you then wrap your life around a non-Christian, you cannot hope to survive as an active believer. Many people have tried to do that, but it's an act of disloyalty to the Lord and it ends in tears.

[41 : 00] The men that Ezra was having to discipline had deliberately transgressed the law of Moses by taking into their lives women who worshipped other gods. And Ezra had to take this severe disciplinary action so as to teach the people that the law of God must be honoured and obeyed.

It was more important to reject idolatry than to avoid divorce. In this case, it was a question of choosing the lesser of two evils.

Now, encouragement number one. Let's learn from Ezra's example to hate sin, to grieve and weep and mourn over it.

Blessed are those who mourn, says Jesus, not least those who mourn over sin. Remember how Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of its sinful rejection of the Son of God?

And Ezra here is mourning over Jerusalem because of its sinful rejection of the law of God. So let's ask the Lord to help us to mourn and to grieve over our sinfulness.

[42 : 04] Let's ask him to help us to hate. to hate what he hates so that we can learn to love what he loves, namely loyalty to him and loyalty to the Bible.

Then encouragement number two. Let's learn also to love and be grateful for godly pastoral discipline. If Ezra had not grasped this painful nettle, the corruption of idolatry would have been allowed to creep further and further into the life of God's people.

Godly discipline is loved and practiced. It's good for us. It's for our safety and our security to know that if we step out of line, if we step away from Bible ethics, we shall be called to account by our church leaders and by our fellow Christians.

It's what all of us need to know. Part of belonging to the fellowship means that we brace each other to live godly lives. it's not as if we're playing big brother to each other, not at all.

It's because we love each other and if we love each other, we care about each other's behavior. I need to know that if I start to behave immorally in some way, there will be a knock on my door, a knock made by a human hand.

[43 : 26] Well, in the big picture of the Bible, why do we have Ezra chapters 9 and 10? This pastoral discipline, although it was painful and difficult, it was done to promote the holiness, the godliness of the people of God.

So here is Ezra, who's really a kind of latter-day Moses, taking care of the people of God. Look back to chapter 9, verse 2. These Israelites are described there by Ezra as the holy race or the holy seed, the elect seed from whom the Messiah, the savior of the world, was to come four and a half centuries later.

This little remnant of the holy race had to be preserved and kept and to have its holiness developed. They were so few in number and they'd been so humbled and trodden down.

They'd been humbled by the Assyrians, then by the Babylonians, then by the Persians, they were then part of the Persian Empire. They were soon to be downtrodden again by the Greeks and finally by the Romans.

But from this dejected and impoverished little nation was soon to arise the son of righteousness with healing in his wings.

[44 : 39] Ezra, in caring for Jerusalem and its people, points us forward to the new Jerusalem where God's people, cleansed from every stain of corruption by the blood of Christ, will live in God's full and glorious presence.

So, friends, let's care for each other in the way that Ezra cared for his contemporaries because through mutual care and pastoral discipline we are preparing each other to stand in glory around the throne of God and to see our Savior who was born from this remnant of Israel.

Let's pray together. Dear God, our Father, have mercy, we pray upon all of us and incline our hearts ever more deeply as we read the Bible to love the things that you love and to hate the things that you hate.

Help us to live godly lives and so to love each other that we're able to keep each other up to the mark, to look after each other when necessary to discipline each other. And we pray that it will all be

to the glory of the name and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen. And you remember to forget to